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Graduates go public?

Student Survey March 2004

With an increase in government spending, the public sector has experienced a mini-boom in recent times. This has had a knock-on effect on the graduate recruitment industry, with public sector employers falling over themselves to attract the best graduates. Much has been made in the media of the fact that modern graduates want to contribute to society, as opposed to just making money in a private sector career. With this in mind, we conducted a survey of student attitudes to public sector careers, and attempted to discover whether graduates really would rather help society, or earn a bit more money to help with those spiralling student debts.

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Key findings

“There is a strong perception that the public sector is a ‘healthier’ place to work.”

- There is a strong perception that the public sector is probably a ‘healthier’ place to work. Over 70 per cent of those surveyed agreed that there was ‘greater job stability in the public sector’, and nearly as many agreed that ‘private sector employees work longer hours’. Just over 60 per cent thought there was a better work/life balance in the public sector.
- The Civil Service is the most popular public sector career destination. When asked to rank five public sector careers in order of preference, 37 per cent of respondents put the Civil Service first. Local government was the second most popular, with 19 per cent first-place votes.
- Most graduate recruitment literature is still geared towards the private sector, so it’s more difficult to find out about public sector careers. Exactly 70 per cent of those surveyed said that university careers services have more information about private sector careers than public sector careers. As a result, 64 per cent said it was ‘easier’ to get a job in the private sector.
- Despite the recent public sector boom, the private sector is still more popular with students than the public sector. Over two thirds of those surveyed said they ‘would rather work in the private sector’.
- Pay is the overwhelming reason why students prefer private sector careers. Over 70 per cent of those who said they would prefer a job in the private sector said that pay was one of the reasons why. And over two thirds of all of those surveyed thought that the public sector is poorly paid.

A student’s view

“I would like to do something worthwhile with my life, instead of making money or making someone else money, which is what people in the private sector predominantly do. There are many worthy causes and problems to be solved in the world, which in turn create a better life for everyone, rather than satisfying the greed of an individual.”

Fiona Cosson, history student, University of Leeds

An employer’s view

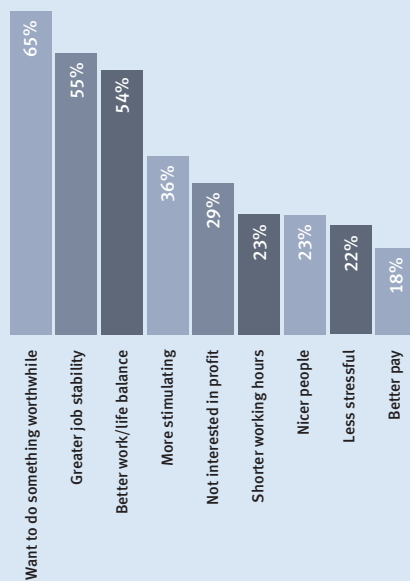
“Career perceptions amongst undergraduates are influenced by many factors, including parents’ experiences, the media and even their peers. As such opinions can often take time to change, even if there is clear distance between the perception and the reality.”

Eleanor Gasse, ngdp consultant, employers’ organisation for local government



Why would some students rather work in the public sector?

Why do you want to work in the public sector?



The findings

- Of the 33 per cent who said they would rather work in the public sector than the private, nearly two thirds said they wanted to do something worthwhile that helped society.
- Money is not as important to those who want to work in the public sector, but job stability and work/life balance is.

Comment

It is plain that those graduates who do want to work in the public sector have altruistic reasons at the forefront of their minds. They also have a strong perception that the public sector would provide them with greater job stability and a better work/life balance. It is interesting that pay is the least significant reason for choosing to work in the public sector.

Student views

“Working in the public sector has the potential to be more rewarding, providing you’re willing to work hard at it.”

Kim Lyon, English and psychology student, Cardiff University

“When it comes to job satisfaction, I don’t think the private sector ranks quite as high as a job in the public sector.”

Shahzad Younas, computer science student, University of Manchester

An employer’s view

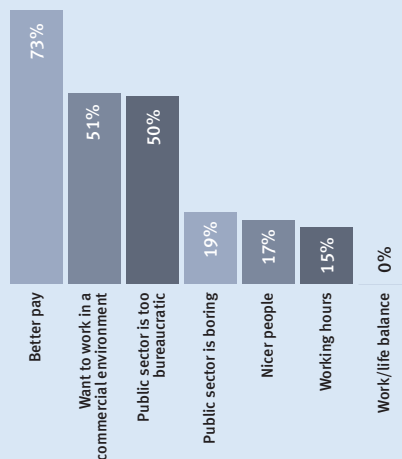
“There are great opportunities for self development, coupled with a friendly, supportive atmosphere where creative problem solving is encouraged at all levels. Salaries are competitive, based on national averages for graduates, and are enhanced by additional benefits (such as pension, gym, staff restaurant etc).”

Angela Larson, MI5 (The Security Service)



Why would some students rather work in the private sector?

Why do you want to work in the private sector?



The findings

- Pay is far and away the most important consideration for those who want to work in the private sector.
- Work/life balance and working hours are the least important considerations.
- The image persists that the public sector is more bureaucratic and less 'commercial' than the private sector.

Comment

As you would expect of graduates who want to work in the private sector, salary was a key motivating factor. This would link strongly with the general perception that private sector careers are much better paid than those in the public sector. The desire to work in a commercial environment also featured prominently – perhaps linked with the pervading belief that the public sector is too bureaucratic in its working practices. Interestingly, work/life balance was totally ignored as a reason for working in the private sector, emphasising again the differences between attitudes towards the public and private sectors.

An employer's view

"The idea that public sector graduate salaries are poor has been around for a long time, but our own ngdp commissioned research showed that our offer, even on a purely financial basis, is highly competitive with the leading commercial sector recruiters. And when whole career offerings were compared to include training, development and opportunity for progression, there were few found which could beat the programme we have on offer."

Eleanor Gasse, ngdp consultant, employers' organisation for local government

Student views

"There's more variation in the private sector, and you can define your own career path with more ease. Private sector companies strive to be the best in their field, so there is more personal reward and recognition to be gained from being in a successful company."

Odera Ume-Ezeoke, management student, University of York

"Private sector firms are more efficient and there is less bureaucracy involved. Innovation is rewarded more highly and there are more opportunities to progress quickly up the career ladder. And the pay is higher!"

Alesha De-Freitas, economics, politics and international studies student, University of Warwick

"The government just doesn't have enough money to offer the kinds of wages possible in the private sector."

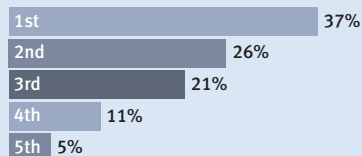
Shahzad Younas, computer science student, University of Manchester



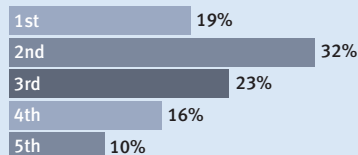
Which public sector career do students prefer?

Rank these public sector career destinations in order of preference

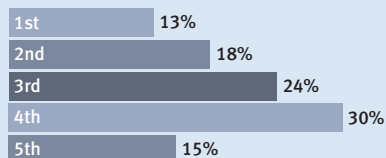
Civil Service



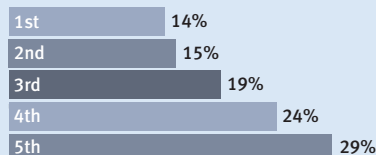
Local government



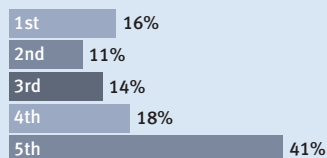
Health service



Voluntary and charity work



Uniformed services



The findings

- Overall, the most popular public sector career destination is the Civil Service, followed by local government.
- The uniformed services polarises opinion. A high percentage viewed it as their least favourite public sector career destination, although 16 per cent placed it as their number one destination, above the health service and voluntary and charity organisations.

Comment

Respondents were asked to rank five different public sector career destinations in order of preference. On a basic scoring system (1st place = 1 point, 5th place = 5 points), the most popular destination was the Civil Service, followed by local government, with a career in the uniformed services coming fifth. Over 37 per cent of respondents picked out the Civil Service as their first choice career destination, and nearly one in five picked out local government. This may not be too surprising – the Civil Service often does well in graduate destination opinion polls – and the elevation of a career in local government may be a result of the work done by local councils to promote careers to graduates. Although the uniformed services came out fifth out of five, 16 per cent of respondents picked it out as their first-choice destination. Over 40 per cent picked it out as their fifth choice, reflecting the strong opinions that this particular area often provokes.

Favourite public sector career destinations

- 1 Civil Service
- 2 Local government
- 3 Health service
- 4 Voluntary and charity work
- 5 Uniformed services

A careers adviser's view

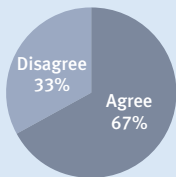
“There are still image problems associated with the public sector and there is work to do in combating student stereotypes. This is reflected by a high level of interest in those elements of the public sector with a distinct brand image, such as MI5 or GCHQ. Although there is more information available to help the student, there is a real lack of awareness of the huge changes in the public sector that have taken place in recent years.”

Kevin Thompson, careers adviser, University of Reading

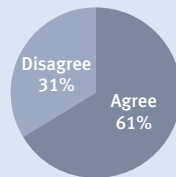


The public sector versus the private sector

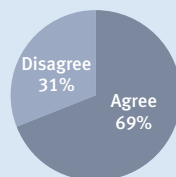
The public sector is poorly paid



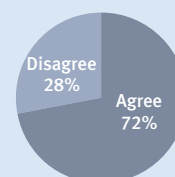
There is a better work/life balance in the public sector



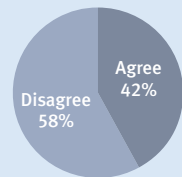
Private sector employees work longer hours



There is greater job stability in the public sector



Public sector jobs are all about bureaucracy and pen-pushing



Public sector views

“Historically the public sector has deserved its reputation for being overly bureaucratic and poorly paid. However, substantial sums are being invested in salaries and technology and, although these are specific initiatives, the desire to move ahead will spread to all areas of public service.”

John Laidlow, consultant radiologist, Hampshire

“We believe the kinds of exposure our trainees get and the results they achieve dispels the myth that public sector careers are overwhelmed with red tape and paperwork.”

Eleanor Gasse, ngdp consultant, employer's organisation for local government

The findings

- There is a strong perception that the public sector may be a ‘better’ place to work, in terms of job stability, work/life balance and working hours.
- There is still a strong perception that the public sector is poorly paid.
- The idea that the public sector is overly bureaucratic may be changing.

Comment

There is a clear notion that a career in the public sector will provide a better work/life balance and greater job stability. So, public sector organisations do some good work to convince graduates of the benefits of working for them. However, maybe there is a lasting image of the public sector as a non-commercial and, ultimately, poorly paid career destination, and it is in these areas that public sector organisations have work to do to challenge assumptions.

Student views

“Firms in the public sector are probably more staff-orientated, so they make fewer demands on your private life.”

Alesha De-Freitas, international studies student, University of Warwick

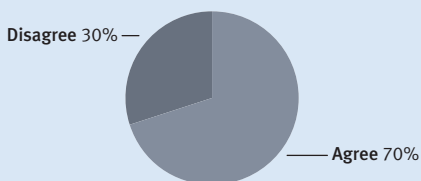
“The public sector is still sometimes perceived to be inefficient and inflexible to change.”

Laura Troth, management student, UMIST

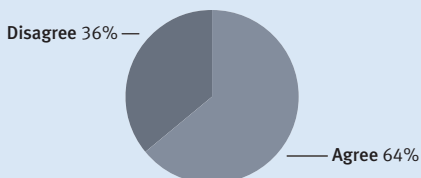


Looking for jobs in the public sector

University careers services have more information about private sector careers



It's easier to get a job in the private sector than the public sector



The findings

- Students feel that information about private sector careers is easier to obtain, compared with public sector careers.

Comment

Some interesting news for careers services and information providers in the graduate sector – the students surveyed felt that information about private sector careers was easier to come by than for careers in the public sector. Linked with this is the perception that it is easier to get a job in the private sector than in the public sector.

This could be because, over many years now, private sector employers have had far more money to spend on advertising to graduates than public sector organisations. And the public sector itself is a collection of sometimes small organisations with very different recruitment patterns. Clearly, this situation has changed over the last two or three years as public sector organisations have flexed a bit more muscle in the graduate sector. In this way, it would be interesting to compare the amount of public sector careers information available now with, say, five or ten years ago.

An employer's view

“We’d like to think the marketing and promotional channels we use to get the ngdp offer to the undergraduate population is as diverse and accessible as any other graduate recruiter, be they commercial or not. There are now even specific publications and events that help promote the careers options in our sector. As such we are not sure availability of information is the issue. Rather, we may still face a challenge of persuading those graduates who are not already predisposed to a career in the public sector to take the opportunity to find out more.”

Eleanor Gasse, ngdp consultant, employers' organisation for local government



Methodology

Why we carried out this survey

The doctorjob.com Student Survey is a twice yearly survey that looks at what is uppermost in the minds of graduates and students as they search for jobs. The public sector emphasis of this survey was born out of the recent boom in the public sector generally and how this has impacted on the graduate market.

How we carried out the survey

Early in 2004, over 2,000 doctorjob users responded when we asked them for their opinions on issues surrounding public sector careers.

About doctorjob.com

doctorjob.com is the No. 1 graduate careers website, receiving over 50,000 visits every week. It hosts nearly 400 graduate employers and over 22,000 graduate jobs.

About GTI

doctorjob.com is published by GTI Specialist Publishers, which also publishes *doctorjob* magazine, doctorjob's *Little Black Book* and the TARGET range of careers magazines. GTI also produces the annual Graduate Trends Survey, an in-depth look at recruitment trends in a number of key sectors. Details of this and other GTI surveys can be found at www.groupgti.com/press.