

Key Demand Factors in Professional Business Courses: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract Most businesses recognize that education and advancement opportunities are essential components of human resource development. Transfer of training is considered to be a significant problem in the process of transferring knowledge, skills, and attitudes from training to a job, even though training and development strive to alter the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a trainee to bring about a positive change in the behavior of the trainee as a result. Comparatively, little attention has been paid to the vital demand factors for professional business courses (such as Computing, Accounting, Human Resources, and Marketing) and whether there are distinct segments in this marketplace. In this paper, the key variables in determining the demand for professional business courses were assessed through interviews with senior managers of professional bodies and the application of an electronic scale. Furthermore, based on the marketing theory of segmentation analysis, the key segments were tested using both summary statistics and chi-square tests. Finally, managerial and research implications of these results were discussed.

Keywords: *Segmentation, Professional business courses, Accounting, Marketing, Computing*

1. Introduction

Our world has demonstrated a massive change since the turn of the century. The current in-demand jobs for business university graduates generally did not exist ten years ago (recent in-demand jobs include internet-related jobs, social media marketing, big data, AI, metaverse, etc.). This rapid change will only continue and probably increase in magnitude. This has critical implications for graduates and postgraduates—they need to continue learning and re-skilling throughout their careers. Companies now demand skill sets from our university graduates, such as innovation, creativity, and the ability to solve problems. When young people become eligible for work, they are also eligible to begin experiencing unemployment. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), it is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to find their first employment opportunity (Axe et al., 2018). It is not the case that all young people face the same challenges in acquiring access to productive and meaningful occupations. The degree to which these challenges are present differs from nation to nation. Despite this, a core group of young people in

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every country are confronted with varying combinations of high and persistent unemployment, jobs of poor quality when finding work, and significant danger of social marginalization (Keese et al., 2013). In most countries around the world, the unemployment rate for young people is significantly greater than for adults (Morsy, 2012). Compared to older workers who have been in their occupations for a longer time, have more job experience, and greater job security, younger workers, often the most recently hired, have a higher likelihood of being terminated. However, even though young workers have unemployment rates that are significantly greater than those of older individuals, the amount of time that young workers spend unemployed is often shorter than the amount of time that older adults spend jobless (O'Higgins, 2001). Interestingly, IBM has designed a supercomputer called Watson which can predict most legal problems (over 85%) with an extremely high level of accuracy (Ying et al., 2016). This means lawyers and solicitors will not be needed at such levels, and those employed lawyers will need to be much more specialized in their ability to solve new problems.

Therefore, professional learning and development must necessarily be an individual process. However, individual competency development is tied to an organizational context and social learning processes, implying that management in work organizations should focus on promoting a healthy and dynamic learning atmosphere. An active learning climate encourages employees to ask questions, seek feedback, reflect on prospective outcomes, explore, and experiment with expanding their learning or applying what they have learned. Furthermore, at the managerial level, leaders must foster an environment where employees are given time, help one another in everyday duties, and have abundant learning opportunities. Such environments enable settings that encourage employees to continually renew and/or upgrade their existing knowledge and abilities, hence favorably contributing to their employability. Previous empirical research has shown that, in the short term, the learning climate contributes to the development of individuals' competencies and, as a result, their employability as measured by career success. In light of employees' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) responsibilities, an organizational atmosphere that encourages active learning is critical. This demonstrates the significance of taking professional courses. There appears to be a significant gap in the literature on the key demand factors for Professional Business Courses – this paper seeks to address this gap.

2. Theoretical Framework

CPD, or life-long learning, is how people retain and expand their professional knowledge and abilities. CPD can take several forms, ranging from formal educational courses to learning through regular work practices. CPD, in its most well-known form, is upgrading professional knowledge through official, short courses offered by occupational groups such as doctors, attorneys, and teachers. Typically, these groups have their own professional body or institute, and membership and a practicing certificate given by this organization may be required to practice the profession (Filipe et al., 2014).

Although there may be national or even worldwide law governing the practice, control may be outsourced to the professional group, a system known as self-regulation. CPD is frequently required in these situations and is overseen by a professional organization. Some professional domains may contain more diversified and less well-defined occupational groups, such as managers. A key conceptual challenge is where to draw the line between what is intended by a professional and what is not. Traditionally, continuing professional development has been focused on teaching and training in more or less formal classroom settings. Even though problems have been found with how skills learned in training are used in the workplace, training is still seen as necessary for organizations (Smith et al., 2006).

Partly because it is hard to transfer knowledge from one place to another, the number of ways to learn has grown over time. There are now both informal and formal ways to learn at work (Eraut, 2004). Marsick and Watkins (2001) defined informal learning as not often highly structured or classroom-based. A workplace is a common place for learning that is not planned (Evers et al., 2011). This is because many more or less structured situations at work are not usually set up with learning in mind. Cheetham and Chivers (2001) highlighted the importance of informal learning in acquiring complete professional competence. They thought CPD was a complicated process and felt that employees often didn't know how and what they had learned. Informal professional learning is based on many different

learning theories, such as behaviorism, cognitive approaches, mixed methods (which combine behaviorist and mental ideas), constructivism, discovery learning, and adult development theories.

Gemmano et al. (2022) examined how a company's learning culture alters the link between training transfer and work performance. An online survey was sent to 164 workers who had just participated in a training opportunity and asked about it. Using data from the past, they conducted the poll. Eighty-seven individuals who had worked in the previous six months and taken an online course participated in the study. Learning culture's function in influencing training transfer and three dimensions of work performance was examined using a moderated path analysis that controlled for factors such as gender and age, as well as training kind and duration (specifically, proficiency, adaptability, and proactivity). Training transfer and learning culture correlated well with every measure of job success. Each component of work performance, including competence, adaptability, and proactivity, had a statistically significant moderating influence on training transfer. They said that an organizational learning culture is critical to the success of training transfer. In addition to competency, flexibility, and proactivity, culture was found to contribute to creating favorable conditions that may facilitate the transfer of training. This link was the focus of the investigation.

For the transfer process, Wang et al. (2022) studied ways to enhance the initial training transfer process. A signaling-theory-based approach was used to identify the antecedents (i.e., training content validity and transfer design). They also looked into the significance of training engagement and criticality in determining the underlying mechanisms. To evaluate a mediation model, they used a sample of 182 employees engaged in a conventional hard and soft skills training program (i.e., quality management). According to these researchers' findings, content validity and transfer design favorably impact initial training transfer. There was a connection between the degree of training involvement and criticality and the initial training transfer. To learn more about how initial training transfers, they looked at the causes of training characteristics and combined their work with research on transfer and personal attitudes.

By tying corporate ethics to customer orientation, Halvorsen et al. (2022) investigated how ethical leadership and ethical training contribute to employee performance. They also explored sequential mediation models of the process through which the moral environment, service climate, and customer orientation mediate the linkages between ethical leadership, ethical training, and employee performance. They supported their four assumptions using a sample of 187 Australian bank employees. The relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance is sequentially mediated by service climate and customer orientation; ethical training and employee performance are sequentially mediated by ethical climate and customer orientation, and the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance is sequentially mediated by ethical climate and customer orientation. Ethical leadership would impact employee performance improvement more than moral training.

Tamara et al. (2021) created an Integrative Transfer of Learning (ITL) model that combines task, personal, context, and pedagogical components. The ITL model gives researchers, teachers, and instructional designers a way to think about how to transfer learning across online, mixed, and face-to-face learning environments to prepare college students from different backgrounds for a complex and changing workforce.

Van et al. (2022) studied the association between formal learning and public sector employees' employability. Social, informal learning and TFL were also examined as moderators. They used secondary cross-sectional data from Dutch public service personnel ($n = 8,858$). Their findings indicate that formal learning boosts employees' employability. TFL also improves two employability skills. TFL negatively influenced the relationship between valence and employability skills. Social informal learning doesn't moderate but directly contributes to employable skills. The results question the focus of research on formal learning to boost employability abilities and contribute fresh insights by introducing formal learning's valence. The study offered evidence for the association between formal learning and employability by concentrating on the valence of formal learning. Segmentation divides a market into sections, each with its demands and desires. For example, gender can be used to segment the footwear market into male and female footwear segments, and quality and price can be used to segment the air travel market into budget and premium airline segments. Wang et al. (2017) show how

transfer learning may be used to model the distribution's tail by learning from the distribution's head and transferring the information to the data-poor classes in the tail.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The Chartered Institute of Management Accounting (CIMA), the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), and the British Computing Society (BCS) all participated in qualitative interviews for this study, which utilized a mixed-methods approach. They were two senior males aged 40 to 60 and one senior female aged 40 to 45; they had 20 years of experience assisting students at professional bodies. Students enrolled at Gulf College, Oman, and those who had previously attended the institution were asked to participate in an online survey. There were 221 students, with 129 males between the ages of 18 and 30 and 92 females between the ages of 31 and 40. The sample was done in a way that was convenient and easy to obtain.

3.2. Instrument

3.2.1. Interview

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers at CIMA (Accounting – Senior International manager CIMA), CIM (Marketing – Senior Manager CIM), and BCS British Computer Society (Computing – Senior manager BCS) as to the key reasons why students should study for professional qualifications.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

First, a survey with 17 questions was developed and validated by some experts (content validity), then it was electronically distributed to some students at Gulf College. A complete list of all the questions from the scale is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Questions in the Research Instrument (Questionnaire)

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Question 1 | What is your age? (four categories - 1 = under 20, 2 = 21-30, 3 = 31-40 and 4 = over 41 years old) |
| Question 2 | What is your gender? (two categories - 1 = Male and 2 = Female) |
| Question 3 | What is your highest qualification? (six categories) |
| Question 4 | Which company/Government department/charity do you work for? (Open-ended free response) |
| Question 5 | How many years have you worked for this company? (1=under 20, 2=21-30, 3=31-40 and 4=over 40) |
| Question 6 | Which sector of the economy does your company operate? (Open-ended free response) |
| Question 7 | Which courses have you completed at Gulf College? (Open-ended free response) |
| Question 8 | How interested are you in studying for a professional course? (Likert scale 1 low interest to 7 extremely high interest) |
| Question 9 | How likely are you to encourage friends and family to study for a professional course? (Likert scale 1 low interest to 7 extremely high interest) |
| Question 10 | When do you want to start studying for a professional qualification? (1 month, 6 months, 1 year 2 years, 3 years and more than 3 years) |
| Question 11 | Which professional courses are you interested in? (Accounting, Marketing, General Business, Project Management, Human Resources, IT) |
| Question 12 | Would your company fund you to study for a professional course? (1 = Yes and 2 = No) |
| Question 13 | What level of professional course would you be interested in? (1 = Foundation, 2 = Intermediate, 3 = Advanced and 4 = Chartered) |
| Question 14 | How would you like to study? (Full-time=1 or Part time=2) |
| Question 15 | What mode of learning would you prefer? (Face-to-face=1, online=2 or blended learning=3) |

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Question 16 | What days of the week would you like to study? (<i>Sun, Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat</i>) |
| Question 17 | Would you like to be added to a professional course newsletter? (<i>1=Yes and 2 = No</i>) |

3.3. Procedure

To measure professional bodies' senior manager's level of concern, senior managers at CIMA (Accounting – Senior International Manager CIMA), CIM (Marketing – Senior Manager CIM), and BCI (Computing – Senior Manager BCS) were interviewed about why students should pursue professional qualifications.

Using Survey Monkey, slightly more than 11,500 professional course survey questionnaires were electronically distributed to current students at Gulf College, Oman (2,681) and past alumni students (8,831), giving a total number of distributed questionnaires of 11,512. All respondents were students who had attended Gulf College at some point (www.surveymonkey.co.uk). The number of returned questionnaires was 221, which is equivalent to approximately 2% of all students who were contacted; this is usually in line with the expected return rates for questionnaires and provided a significant enough sample to carry out descriptive statistical analysis (summary measures, frequencies, and crosstabs). The information gathering for this study began in April 2021 and continued until it was completed in June 2021.

To analyze the data, two key segments were tested statistically using SPSS (version 20), firstly, gender differences (male vs. female) and age differences (younger vs. older). We also analyzed the data through the STP marketing model (Smith, 1956) of Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning, which has allowed companies and organizations to effectively target their marketing mix and marketing efforts for products and services. This is because one marketing tactic/strategy will never fit all segments (issues such as gender, age, culture, location, and nationality can lead to totally different needs, wants, and desires). Furthermore, what is essential or critical to one segment may be of little or no interest to another. Therefore, it is highly recommended to test what critical components exist for a company or organization to make sales more accessible and practical. Generally, segmentation analysis will often reveal five or six significant segments. In this regard, it is critical to understand these segments and how to structure your marketing mix to meet their wants, needs, and desires directly. It is not usual for some characteristics to overlap elements, but this must be tested. Finally, each segment's value to the company or organization needs to be assessed to decide whether features should be embraced or ignored. This led to two hypotheses, as listed below.

| | |
|--------------|--|
| Hypothesis 1 | Gender differences, tested for by Chi-square test. |
| Hypothesis 2 | Age differences, tested for by Chi-square test. |

4. Results

Three interviews generally revealed eight primary reasons students study for a professional qualification, as in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Eight Primary Reasons - Why Study for a Professional Qualification?

| | |
|----|---|
| 1. | A professional qualification will expand your skill set and knowledge base. |
| 2. | A professional qualification will help you gain real-world experience - bridging the gap between academic theory and real-world practice. |
| 3. | A professional qualification will broaden your career opportunities worldwide. |
| 4. | A professional qualification will improve your current career progression. |
| 5. | A professional qualification will demonstrate commitment to your career development. |
| 6. | A professional qualification will improve your network. |
| 7. | A professional qualification will feel empowered, |
| 8. | Accredited professional qualifications are recognized worldwide and offer annual membership. |

All three senior managers at these professional bodies clearly stated that technological change was dramatically changing their subject areas. Furthermore, many people in professional business careers

know that their subject area demands new skills and knowledge. Therefore, completing professional business courses is key to remaining at the top of your career to stand out. Finally, all three of these senior managers at these professional accredited bodies stated that memberships in these bodies also have significant advantages in staying up to date with new ideas, theories, and in particular new laws, rules, and regulations.

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the high response rate in this poll. In the first segment, students who had already begun professional training did not complete the survey; in the second segment, students who had completed professional training did not complete the study; and in the third segment, students who were still enrolled did not comprehend what professional training entailed or represented (segment 3: marketing challenge). In the fourth and last survey segment ("planning to start"), 221 survey forms were sent back by students. The results of the survey are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Summary Statistics

| Questions | | | | | |
|---|--|----------------|--------------------|---------------|---|
| Q1. What is your age? | Under 20 12 | 21 – 30 119 | 31-40 70 | Over 40 20 | Generally, the largest group was under 30 years of age. |
| Q2. What is your gender? | Male 129 (58%) | | Female 92 (42%) | | Slightly more males than females |
| Q8. How interested are you in professional business courses? | Over 50% of people stated they were highly interested in professional courses (53% of people ticked either 6 or 7) | | | | |
| Q9. Would you encourage friends and family to study for professional business courses? | Over 50% of people stated they were highly likely to recommend professional courses to friends and family (50% of people ticked either 6 or 7) | | | | |
| Q10. When do you want to start studying for professional business courses | 52% wanted to start a professional course within the following year. | | | | |
| Q11. Would your company fund you to take a professional business course? | 56% stated yes, their company would fund them. This could be in terms of time, money, or just one of these. | | | | |
| Q12. Which professional business course are you interested in | Fairly even split between all six options (Accounting = 35%, Marketing = 23%, General Management = 35%, Project Management = 23%, Human Resources = 31% and Information Technology = 27%. A few respondents wish to take more than one professional subject, such as accounting and IT – maybe to widen their future career prospects. | | | | |
| Q13. What level of professional business course would you be interested in? | 52% of students were interested in the foundation and intermediate courses, but also strong demand for advanced courses | | | | |
| Q14. How would you like to study for a professional business course? | Generally, students wanted or required part-time study 61% | | | | |
| Q15. Which mode of study would you prefer? | Generally, students wanted face-to-face study 47% | | | | |
| Q16. Which days of the week would you like to study? | Very strong preference to study on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays | | | | |
| Q17. Would you like to receive a regular newsletter about professional business courses | 75% of respondents wanted to be added to the professional course newsletter – demonstrating very strong interest/demand | | | | |

The results of the Chi-square tests for the two hypotheses are presented in Table 4. It shows that in addition to preferring part-time study, women tend to begin their education at a little younger and prefer to start professional business courses earlier. In segment 2 (age difference), females desire to start their education earlier than males, whereas younger individuals prefer part-time study. We cannot just combine the results of segment 1 and segment 2 without considering that they have different marketing strategies (targeted and positioning).

Table 4
Chi-Square Tests for Segment 1 and Segment 2

| Questions | Hypothesis 1 Segment 1 Gender differences | Hypothesis 2 Segment 2 Age differences |
|---|--|---|
| | Statistically significant females are slightly younger than males | n/a |
| Q1. What is your age? | Statistically significant females are slightly younger than males | n/a |
| Q2. What is your gender? | n/a | Statistically significant females slightly younger than males |
| Q8. How interested are you in professional business courses? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q9. Would you encourage friends and family to study for professional business courses? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q10. When do you want to start studying for professional business courses? | Statistically significant females want to start slightly earlier than males | Not statistically significant |
| Q11. Would your company fund you to take a professional business course? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q12. Which professional business course are you interested in? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q13. What level of professional business course would you be interested in? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q14. How would you like to study for a professional business course? | Statistically significant slight preference for part-time study with males. females are fairly evenly divided between p/t and f/t | Statistically significant slight preference for younger people to study p/t |
| Q15. Which mode of study would you prefer? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q16. Which days of the week would you like to study? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| Q17. Would you like to receive a regular newsletter about professional courses? | Not statistically significant | Not statistically significant |
| <i>P < .01</i> | | |

5. Discussion

The fundamental demand determinants for professional business courses (such as computing, accounting, human resources, and marketing), as well as the question of whether or not there are separate subsets of consumers in this market, have received a minimal amount of attention (Adarbah & Jajarmi, 2022; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). This study aims to analyze the critical factors that influence the demand for professional business courses by conducting three interviews with senior managers of professional bodies and using an electronic scale. In addition, in light of the marketing theory of segmentation analysis, the essential segments were examined by applying summary statistics and chi-square tests.

Concerning the sampling, it should be mentioned that there are numerous reasons for the small return rate of the scale. Firstly, some students had already started professional courses and tended not to complete the questionnaire (segment 1: already started). Secondly, some students had already completed professional courses so managed not to complete the questionnaire (segment 2: already completed), and some of the current students did not understand what professional courses entailed or represented (segment 3: marketing challenge). The fourth segment of the students who completed the

questionnaire was generally highly interested in starting professional courses (segment 4: planning to start), primarily making up 221 of the questionnaires returned.

With respect to gender and age, there are a few key differences between the segments; firstly, in segment 1 (gender difference), females tend to start their studies slightly younger, and they want to start their professional business courses earlier; they also have a preference to study part-time (Shokym et al., 2022; Wijayanti et al., 2022). In segment 2 (age difference) again, females tend to want to start their studies younger than males, and there is also a preference for younger people to study part-time. So, generalizing these results for segment 1 and segment 2 should include the marketing plan (targeting and positioning) that differs for these two segments, and the answer is no. However, these results must be carefully analyzed when designing marketing materials to appeal to all stakeholders (Akbari & Pishghadam, 2022; Pishghadam et al., 2016).

There appears to be strong demand for professional business courses in the Middle East, but this demand is divided into several key segments - which appear to overlap in some areas (Adarbah & Jajarmi, 2022; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). This finding will help effectively market these courses to the segments highly interested in professional courses. It was also found that marketing of these professional courses should fully utilize both traditional and digital marketing channels (particularly social media) to fully inform students of both the potential benefits of professional courses (regular webinar series) and the easy availability of key information such as courses/start dates/fees (this should be directly available on the college web site). There are also extreme preferences for the days of the week students would like to study (the finding of studying on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays was highly preferred) (Akbari & Pishghadam, 2022; Pishghadam et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is a strong preference for face-to-face study, and they generally want to study part-time (usually in the early evening)- this is not a surprising result as many people looking for professional courses will be working full-time during the day and maybe get married, starting a family or already have a family. These demands must be fully accommodated to maximize the appeal of professional courses to very busy people. Another key finding was that many students demonstrating a strong interest in professional business courses want to start their studies within the next year (Akbari & Pishghadam, 2022; Pishghadam et al., 2016).

There appears to be an extreme preference to which days of the week students would like to study for professional business courses (in the Middle East). Therefore, it is critical to consider this when timetabling these courses to maximize the number of students attending each course (Adarbah & Jajarmi, 2022; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). It is also essential for the college/institution to cover break-even costs and make a small profit when running these courses – so student cohort numbers will need around 10 to 15 students. Furthermore, this group size would create an ideal teaching environment allowing for innovative group work, leadership/teamwork approaches, and individual work. It is also important that all teaching sessions are recorded in Microsoft Teams or Zoom so students can return to key learning points as often as they wish and if a student is ill or has family work commitments that they do not miss essential lectures/tutorials. Students studying for professional business courses are likely to have families and highly challenging careers - so carving out time to study can be very difficult (Akbari & Pishghadam, 2022; Pishghadam et al., 2016). To make it easier for students to plan and look for professional business courses, a full timetable of all events/dates/times and requirements must be published before the start of the course. The results from this questionnaire also clearly indicated that most students in professional business courses would prefer both face-to-face and online teaching (blended learning).

Since the findings of the study are limited to Oman, it can be replicated in other key Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. Culture is highly likely to play a key role in students' attitudes towards professional business courses, and this should be thoroughly tested utilizing Hofstede's cultural index (1983). These results could also be re-tested in both the Far East (China, Japan) and European/American countries – it is highly likely that there will be some significant similarities and some major differences. To develop further insights into the demand for professional business courses, small focus groups could be used to explore the segments in more depth (Adarbah & Jajarmi, 2022; Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). This study utilized only one College in

Oman; this is a limitation that further studies should address by using multiple institutions across a country, maybe 5 to 10 or more institutions.

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