PERCEPTIONS AND HIRING BIAS ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF CORPORATE LAWYERS WITH ONLINE LAW DEGREES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how Korean people perceive corporate lawyers holding online law school degrees. A total of 142 people participated in the research, with half of them having hiring experience. An independent sample t-test was conducted to see the difference between those who took online courses and those who did not. A multiple-regression analysis was conducted to see the effects of people's bias when hiring these online law school graduates. The results showed that those who took online courses perceived their professional skills in expertise, problem-solving, and adaptability as high. Moreover, hiring experience, work experience at foreign companies, and expertise were significant predictors in determining corporate lawyers' competencies.

KEYWORDS

Hiring Bias, Corporate Lawyers, Expertise, Online Law Degrees, Competency

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent increase in online education modalities has entered into law school education. Many law schools are embracing online JD programs while marketing the equivalent or sometimes better designs compared to traditional law school programs. This change greatly appeals to many candidates whose access to law school has been denied because of financial or geographical hurdles. Online law school programs are practical alternatives to traditional programs because legal professionals require more self-regulated learning than others. According to the theory of andragogy, online learning modalities offer exceptional opportunities for independent work with rigorous self-management. To this end, online law school programs have much to offer. The recent introduction of learning technologies has broadened what online learning can provide to learners: interactive learning, team projects, online discussions, and more. In addition, the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence threatens the scope of legal services that were previously occupied by lawyers alone. What this means for law students is that their investment in law school education might not yield the return they had expected.

While JD programs offer training applicable to nearly all law students regardless of fields they will dive in, specialization is a key concern for many law school students. This research focuses particularly on law students who aspire to enter business law, hoping to become legal counsels inside corporations. Unlike generalists who cover various legal cases, corporate lawyers' jobs are unique. They need to keep on learning about the market environment and new laws that govern sales activities, which might be seriously curtailed without legal guidance. Companies face various types of lawsuits; therefore, they often hire lawyers specialized in each case. Yet, companies need corporate lawyers who understand their business from the inside out. These lawyers work to devise preventive measures in various contracts their businesses enter into. Therefore, hiring competent corporate lawyers can be an invaluable asset to their operation.

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However, many employers and hiring managers have little knowledge about the competencies that corporate lawyers need. When reviewing the job applications of these corporate lawyers, many biases may work to deny these lawyers fair chances to prove their worth. Many upper managers prefer evidence-based decision-making. Unfortunately, in hiring corporate lawyers, there is little empirical evidence accounting for the complex mechanism of the hiring process. Some research reports that many employers prefer applicants holding traditional school degrees to those who have online ones (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Adams et al., 2007; Dikkers et al., 2011). This may be true for online law school graduates. Consequently, this research aimed to explore the perceptions of employers regarding employment opportunities for candidates graduating from online law schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. ANDRAGOGY AND SELF-REGULATED LEARNING FOR JD PROGRAMS

The growing scope of online education has permeated the field of law. Many law schools are adopting online JD programs, attracting students by arguing that their programs are just as rigorous as their on-campus counterparts. According to andragogy and self-regulated learning theories, online learning encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. Andragogy is derived from adult learning theory (Abu Bakar, 2013; Henschke, 2010), and it consists of five tenets: (1) the self-management of learning, (2) the empowerment of learners leading to increased motivation, (3) the reliance on the life experience of learners, (4) the objectives of learning, and (5) the practical, real-world solutions to problems (Chametzky, 2014). Online JD programs are designed to help students with the first and second tenets of andragogy. Unlike K-12 education, law school students have clearer career goals and have made time and financial investments to advance their careers. In traditional law school settings, students sit passively and listen to the lecture. In an online setting, however, students must take a more active role in their knowledge acquisition. Knowles (1980) emphasized the importance of students taking responsibility for their own learning by being active consumers of knowledge and being self-directed. Such self-directed learning is conducive to online learning. By setting their own pace in online learning, students can decide when to study and what direction their learning will take. This quality is particularly pertinent to law school students because their future careers demand continued learning about updated laws and legal precedents in the cases they undertake. The ideal picture of self-regulated learning is complemented by empowerment and motivation. When students take the steering wheel of their learning, they are more likely to feel empowered. Only then, are they more motivated to learn the materials they are learning. In many settings, online learning offers the freedom for students to choose where they learn and when they learn, thereby empowering them to assume a more active role in their learning process. This is particularly needed for lifelong learners like law school students.

2.2. ONLINE VS. TRADITIONAL LAW DEGREES: HOW EMPLOYERS PERCEIVE EDUCATIONAL MODALITIES

Fogle and Elliot (2013) conducted research targeting employers across multiple industries. They investigated whether hiring managers held favorable attitudes toward graduates from online universities or from traditional universities and found that employers perceive traditional modalities as more credible than a purely online modality across multiple industries. Interestingly, they found that the hiring managers hold significantly more positive attitudes toward online education if they themselves had experienced online education. Unfortunately, some research showed that employers preferred traditional education degrees to online degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Adams et al., 2007; Adams, 2008; Dikkers et al., 2011). However, more recent studies show promising changes taking place. Watson (2016) conducted research on the acceptance of online degrees by employers. He found that 83% of employers viewed online and

traditional degrees as equal among accredited institutions. This shows that attitudes toward online education are growing more favorable. However, the participants raised concerns about the lack of social interaction as the downside of online education. Lawyers, particularly corporate lawyers, require various competencies; however, their social interaction may be minimal in their workplace compared to lawyers specialized in other areas. Their communication often takes written forms rather than one-on-one and verbal interactions with clients. Taking the online modality into account, employers may be becoming more favorable towards applicants who have online law degrees.

2.3. SPECIALIZATION IN CORPORATE LAW PRACTICE

According to Business Law Education Committee (2016), law faculties are recognizing that law schools are professional schools rather than graduate schools. Preparing law students for legal profession is becoming the key focus. For business lawyers who are working independently or inside corporates require expertise unique to the sectors they belong to. Business Law Education Committee suggests that business lawyers—including corporate lawyers—need professional skills like problem-solving, legal analysis, critical thinking, factual investigation, recognizing and resolving dilemmas. To carry out their tasks successfully, they must keep updating their legal knowledge befitting their roles within their organization. Rosen (2010) argues that specialization is the key for lawyers, and it becomes complicated in large corporate sectors. Unlike generalists, lawyers working in corporates cannot easily limit the subject matter, clients or industries they work for. They need agility and refined understanding of legalities applicable for different market environments that are constantly evolving. Powell (2018) explains the roles of corporate lawyers. He argues that, unlike generalists, corporate lawyers take on the roles as legal entrepreneurs developing and promoting new legal devices and strategies to defend the interests of shareholders and corporate stakeholders. They must constantly update their legal knowledge to better build legal frameworks and need to constantly update their knowledge about new laws. Unlike conventional top-down work, they need to take bottom-up approach to knowledge creation to plan the course of action as their companies move towards their future goals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does taking online course impact work-related skills?

2. What influence do education and work experience have on the perceived competencies of applicants with online law degrees?

3. What factors are associated with work-related skills?

4. How do biases about innate talent affect the future work performance of online law school graduates?

3. METHODS

A survey questionnaire was developed and distributed to people in South Korea. Because the survey was distributed online, participants completed the survey in a separate environment free of any influences, thereby addressing the concerns regarding the independence assumption. One should note that these people were comfortable with online or mobile technology. As is known, Koreans are generally well-educated with a large proportion of the population having college degrees. The participants voluntarily filled out the survey. Some insincere responses were removed during the analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	*N*	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Gender (Female)	142	.58	.49	0	1
Age	142	42.36	7.07	35	69
Education	142	5.11	.74	3	6
Years of Work	142	13.64	7.91	1	40
Hiring Experience	142	.47	.50	0	1
Took Online Courses	142	.86	.35	0	1
Worked in Foreign Co.	142	.25	.43	0	1
Having Expertise	142	4.13	.57	2.67	5
Problem-Solving Skill	142	4.13	.61	2.33	5
Adaptability	142	4.16	.63	2.33	5
Preference for Similarity	142	4.18	.56	2.5	5
Talent Perception	142	3.28	1.23	1	5
Legal Knowledge (Online)	142	4.15	.58	2.67	5

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the variables included in this research. A total of 142 individuals participated in the research, with slightly more female participants and an average age of 42.36 years. The participants are well-educated, with an average education level of 5.11, which indicates an average level of college education. They have an average work experience of 13.64 years. Almost half of the participants (47%) have hiring experience, and the majority (86%) have taken online courses. However, only 25% have worked in foreign companies, indicating that most participants have worked in domestic companies.

In terms of skills and perception, participants rated themselves highly in expertise (4.13), problem-solving skills (4.13), and adaptability (4.16), with a strong preference for similarity in social interaction (4.18). Talent perception showed more variability (M = 3.28), while perception of legal knowledge of applicants who have online law school degrees were generally favorable (M = 4.15). The sample consists of well-educated with considerable work experience who are mostly confident in their abilities.

4. RESULTS

Table 2. Cronbach's *Alpha* of Key Variables

Variables	Sample Question Items	*Cronbach's alpha*
Expertise	I have a good understanding of my field I possess the skills needed to perform my task effectively. I have a high level of professional knowledge.	.75
Problem Solving	I can effectively analyze and solve complex problems. I can think critically and make decisions based on solid reasoning. I can find effective solutions to the problems I face.	.82
Adaptability	I can quickly adapt to new environments. I keep on learning new things and improve my skills. I can handle changes in my work.	.81
Preference Similarity	I enjoy spending time with similar people. I feel comfortable being around people with a similar background. I feel at ease with people who share similar values. I prefer to associate with people who have similar beliefs.	.81
Talent Perception	I believe that certain races are born with natural talents. I believe that people from certain regions are born with natural talents.	.87
Legal Knowledge (online law)	The applicant can grasp key legal issues and suggest appropriate responses. The applicant can understand the procedures for resolving legal problems. The applicant can gather and apply relevant legal case precedents.	.81

Table 2 displays the items measured in this study. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to examine internal consistency. According to Field (2013), the alpha value of 0.7 or higher is considered acceptable, and 0.8 is recommended for psychometric measures. Most of the constructs showed alpha coefficients of 0.75 or above, which demonstrates acceptable internal consistency. Therefore, these items were merged into single composite variables.

Table 3. Independent Sample *t*-test by Online Course Experience

		Took Online (*n* = 122)	No Online (*n* = 20)	Mean Difference	t	p-value
Education	Mean (SE)	5.19 (.06)	4.60 (.26)	-.60	-3.45	.001
Years of Work	Mean (SE)	13.42 (.63)	15.00 (2.79)	1.58	.83	.409
Hiring Experience	Mean (SE)	.52 (.05)	.15 (.08)	-.37	-3.20	.002
Worked Foreign Co.	Mean (SE)	.29 (.04)	.00 (.00)	-.29	-2.82	.006
Having Expertise	Mean (SE)	4.18 (.05)	3.83 (.15)	-.34	-2.55	.012
Problem-Solving	Mean (SE)	4.19 (.05)	3.75 (.18)	-.44	-3.06	.003
Adaptability	Mean (SE)	4.23 (.05)	3.77 (.17)	-.46	-3.14	.002
Pref. Similarity	Mean (SE)	4.23 (.05)	3.86 (.14)	-.36	-2.75	.007
Talent Perception	Mean (SE)	3.32 (.11)	3.05 (.23)	-.27	-.91	.37

Equal Variance Assumed

Next, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted to examine differences in people's experiences taking online courses. As shown above, participants who had taken online courses had a significantly higher level of education, $t(140) = -3.45$, $p < .001$. These people had more hiring experience, $t(140) = -3.20$, $p = .002$. However, they had more experience working in foreign companies, $t(140) = -2.82$, $p = .006$. They reported having more expertise in their field [$t(140) = -2.55$, $p = .012$], higher problem-solving skills [$t(140) = -3.06$, p = .003], higher adaptability [$t(140) = -3.14$, $p = .002$], and a greater preference for similarity [$t(140) = -2.75$, p = .007].

Table 4. Pearson Correlation of Key Variables

	Education	Years of Work	Hiring Experience	Took Online	Worked Foreign	Having Expertise	Problem-Solving	Adaptability	Pref. Similarity
Years of Work	-.46***								
Hiring Experience	-.12	.30***							
Took Online	.28***	-.07	.26**						
Worked Foreign	-.27**	.07	-.11	-.23**					
Having Expertise	.53***	-.36***	.03	.21*	-.20*				
Problem-Solving	.61***	-.43***	-.04	.25**	-.16	.81***			
Adaptability	.56***	-.40***	-.07	.26**	-.18*	.83***	.80***		
Pref. Similarity	.46***	-.41***	-.14	.23**	-.03	.65***	.69***	.69***	
Talent Perception	.12	-.10	-.17*	.08	-.25**	.18*	.15	.08	.19*

*p < .05 *   p < .01 **   p < .001 ***

A pairwise correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between key variables. The results revealed several significant correlations. Education was positively correlated with expertise ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), problem-solving ($r = .61$, $p < 0.001$), adaptability ($r = .56$, $p < .001$), and preference for similarity ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). Additionally, education was positively related to having taken online courses ($r = .28$, $p = .001$), but it was negatively correlated with years of work ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$) and work experience at foreign companies ($r = -.27$, $p = .001$). This suggests that individuals with higher education tend to have less work experience in foreign companies and fewer overall years of work. They perceive themselves as having better expertise, problem-solving skills, and adaptability. Despite having such competencies, they are more inclined to associate with people who share similar backgrounds, values, and qualities.

Years of work was found to have several significant negative correlations. Specifically, it was negatively correlated with expertise ($r = -.36$, $p < .001$), problem-solving ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$), and adaptability ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$), indicating that longer work experience was related to lower levels of these skills. However, years of work experience was positively correlated with hiring experience ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals with longer years in the workforce tend to have more opportunities to hire employees.

The data showed that working in foreign companies was negatively correlated with experience taking online courses ($r = .23$, $p = .006$) and education ($r = .27$, $p = .001$). This indicates that individuals with higher education and those who took online courses were more likely to have

worked in foreign companies. In contrast, expertise had strong positive correlations with several variables, including education ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), problem-solving ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), adaptability ($r = .83$, $p < .001$), and preference similarity ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that individuals with higher expertise also demonstrate stronger problem-solving abilities, higher adaptability, and greater preference to interact with people who share similar qualities.

Problem-solving was another key skill that showed positive correlations with other variables, including education ($r = .61$, $p < .001$), adaptability ($r = .80$, $p < .001$), and preference for similarity ($r = .69$, $p < .001$). This suggests that individuals who are good problem solvers tend to be more adaptable and have a stronger desire to interact with others who share similar qualities. Adaptability, in turn, was positively associated with expertise ($r = .83$, $p < .001$), problem-solving ($r = .80$, $p < .001$), and preference for similarity ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), but negatively correlated with years of work ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that adaptability is closely tied to skills like expertise and problem-solving, but tends to decrease with more years of work experience.

Lastly, preference for similarity was positively correlated with expertise ($r = .65$, $p < .001$), problem-solving ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), and adaptability ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals with higher skills in these areas have a stronger desire to interact with people who are not so different from themselves. Talent perception was positively correlated with expertise ($r = .18$, $p = .030$) and preference for similarity ($r = .19$, $p = .025$), but it was negatively correlated with hiring experience ($r = -.17$, $p = .042$).

Table 5. Regression Model Predicting Legal Knowledge

Legal Knowledge	Unstandardized Coefficient		*Standardized*	*t*	*p*-value
	B	Standard Error			
Cons.	1.75	.40	.	4.34	.000
Education	.06	.06	.08	1.08	.283
Years of Work	-.01	.00	-.08	-1.28	.203
Hiring Experience	-.30	.07	-.26	-4.15	.000
Worked at Foreign	-.22	.08	-.17	-2.80	.006
Took Online	.06	.10	.04	.59	.555
Having Expertise	.31	.11	.30	2.72	.008
Problem-Solving	.15	.10	.16	1.46	.148
Adaptability	-.03	.10	-.04	-.32	.748
Prefer. Similarity	.27	.08	.26	3.17	.002
Talent Perception	-.06	.03	-.12	-2.08	.040

A multiple regression model was fitted to examine the predictors of people's judgments of legal knowledge of corporate lawyers who have online law school degrees. The model's predictability was higher than a model simply using mean values of the independent variables, $F_{(10, 131)} =$

22.09, p < .001. The adjusted R² value was 0.5993, indicating that approximately 60% of the variance in the judgment of legal knowledge of the corporate lawyers with online degrees can be explained by the predictors included in this model.

Several significant predictors emerged from this analysis. Hiring experience showed a significant negative relationship with legal knowledge perception (β = -.30, p < .001), indicating that people with hiring experience were less likely to perceive those with online law school degrees as possessing substantial legal knowledge. Similarly, work experience at a foreign company negatively impacted legal knowledge perception, (β = -.22, p = .006).

On the positive side, having expertise in their own fields (β = .31, p = .008) and finding comfort in interacting with others who have similar qualities and (β = .27, p = .002) were significant predictors of legal knowledge perception. These results suggest that individuals who possess expertise and had a preference for communicating with co-workers with similar qualities were more likely to judge corporate lawyers' legal knowledge to be on par with that of corporate lawyers with traditional law degrees.

Interestingly, talent perception negatively influenced legal knowledge perception (β = -.06, p = .040), which implies that recognizing different talents reduced the legal knowledge perception of online law degree holders.

Table 6. Check for Normality Assumption

Variable	Observation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Adj. Chi2	Prob.>Chi2
Residuals	142	.034	.903	4.57	.102

Table 6 represents the results of skewness and kurtosis tests, using residuals. The skewness value was .034 and the kurtosis value was .903, indicating minimal deviation from normality. When these two are combined, the adjusted chi-square test statistic of normality suggests that the residuals do not significantly deviate from normality.
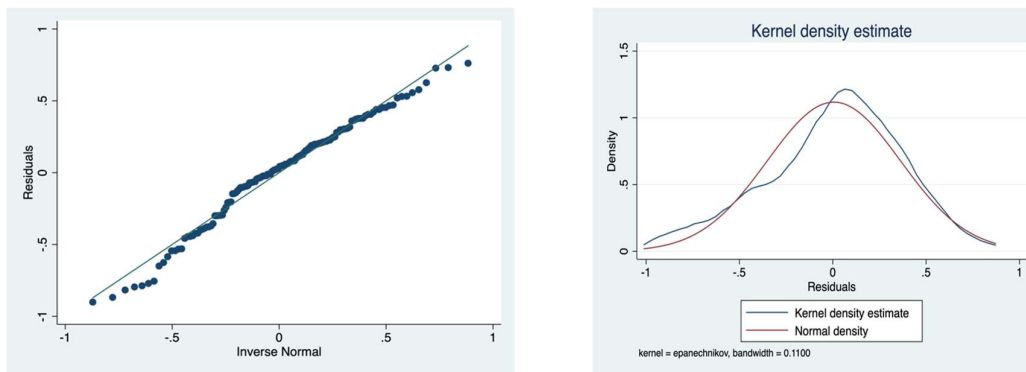

Figure 1. QQ plot & Kernel Density Estimate

For peace of mind, two other tests were conducted to see the normality assumption. **Figure 1** shows the visual representation of the check for the normality assumption. In the QQ-plot, most residuals fall neatly along the line, while the kernel density estimate of the residuals display a smooth, symmetrical bell-shaped curve that closely approximate the overlaid normal distribution line. Together, these results suggest that the normality assumption is satisfied.

Table 7. Variance Inflation Factor Values for Independent Variables

	VIF	1/VIF
Adaptability	4.47	.22
Having Expertise	4.41	.23
Problem-Solving Skills	4.03	.25
Preference for Similarity	2.36	.42
Education	1.91	.52
Years of Work	1.47	.68
Hiring Experience	1.37	.73
Took Online Courses	1.28	.78
Worked at Foreign Companies	1.25	.80
Talent Perception	1.22	.82
Mean VIF	*2.38*	

To assess the presence of multicollinearity among the independent variables, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were examined. Adaptability has the highest VIF of 4.47 and Talent Perception has the lowest at 1.22, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern because all VIF values fell well below the commonly accepted threshold of 10. These results indicate that independent variables do not exhibit problematic multicollinearity.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

5.1. DISCUSSION

This study investigated hiring managers' perceptions of online law school degree holders. The *t*-test results show that individuals who had taken online courses themselves are more likely to perceive themselves as having expertise, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. This finding aligns with the positive impact of self-regulated learning and theories of andragogy, which enable students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. One important factor to note is that online courses have undergone transformations over the past few decades with the help of technological advances. Depending on what types of online education they have experienced, hiring managers or employers might have different viewpoints regarding the credibility of online law school programs when hiring corporate legal counsels.

Next, our analysis revealed that hiring managers view applicants' education and work experience as important indicators when determining the professional abilities of applicants with online law degrees. Interestingly, hiring managers who have a higher educational attainment are more likely to perceive online law programs positively. To them, education modalities (online vs. traditional) are not important indicators of their professional skills. One thing to note here is that individuals who have worked at foreign companies are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward online law degrees.

The correlation analysis showed that education levels have a strong positive and significant correlation with professional skills—expertise, problem-solving skills, and adaptability. This shows that higher education attainment is associated with a higher evaluation of one's own professional skills. Additionally, individuals who had taken online courses themselves reported having better adaptability and problem-solving skills. This finding suggests that online education modalities might reinforce independent and self-regulated learning skills, which might positively translate into their work performance later on.

People who believe talent are innate quality are less likely to perceive online law school graduates as capable of carrying out their tasks successfully. This question revisits the fundamental question of nature versus nurture. Some talents may be innate. However, legal knowledge is fostered through rigorous programs and learners' efforts. Unfortunately, biases do affect perception regarding different education modalities and their connection with job performance.

5.2. LIMITATION

The finding that those who took online courses were more likely to perceive themselves as having expertise, adaptability, and problem-solving skills must not be mistaken as a causal relationship. It is entirely possible that individuals who strongly aspired to beef up their professional skills might have taken online courses together with in-person classes. Another limitation that one should take into account is the correlation between education levels and perceived professional skills. Because these professional skills come from self-report responses, they do not necessarily reflect professional competencies measured by supervisors or coworkers. However, this limitation suggests the direction for future research. Interviewing supervisors or cross-referencing these people's work performance that supervisors have assessed might rule out the concerns about potential bias.

5.3. CONCLUSION

Hiring the right professional can be a critical success factor for businesses. When hiring corporate legal counsels, employers must note that biases of a hiring manager may work against their interests. This research findings provide empirical evidence of how biases and perceptions influence hiring decisions. This is not to suggest that online law programs are superior to traditional ones. As law schools increasingly adopt online modalities to broaden access, graduates of online law programs should be evaluated not by the format of their education, but by their performance in practice. Unfortunately, biases can deny these potentially skilled professionals the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. Therefore, employers must examine and addresses any biases among hiring managers to minimize the hidden losses.

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