EMPLOYER RATING PLATFORMS AS A TOOL TO MOTIVATE GERMANS TO APPLY

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Abstract

The use of employer rating platforms is increasing. Individuals use internet-based rating platforms to make decisions and to investigate information. This paper concentrates on the recruiting process and evaluates the usefulness of employer rating platforms for companies. Companies suffer from a lack of qualified candidates for their open positions and have to improve their employer branding. Marketing scientists have found that rating platforms are a powerful tool to influence consumers. The word-of-mouth (*wom*) framework provides an explanation to understand the mechanism and opportunities of rating platforms. This study has conducted a survey with 626 participants to research the effects of employer rating platforms on potential candidates. The data has been evaluated with the t-test, LSD ANOVA, the Spearman correlation and indicators of descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, median, mode, standard deviation and range). The result is that employer rating platforms have an influence on potential candidates and the research observed differences between demographic groups.

Keywords: word of mouth, human resource management, employer rating platform

INTRODUCTION

Social media, with its opportunities, influences society and the daily lives of individuals. Social media provides individuals with the opportunity to share and exchange information. Individuals can react to information and provide comments or further information to interested users. They can provide their opinion and discuss it with other users (Suphan et al. 2012). The internet is changing the communication process for society. The internet is a platform that allows quick and easy communication in real time without borders. The channels to collect information are increasing. Social media provides many opportunities for individuals to investigate companies. On the other hand it provides social media users the opportunity to exchange and share information with a large audience (Mitchell 2005; Gibbs et al. 2015). This is a great opportunity for users to influence others.

Marketing scientists have already conducted many studies in this field. This new research concentrates on employer rating platforms to investigate their use in a specific situation. The employment seeking process is very important for individuals because they need employment. The decision to choose a company is important for people because making the wrong decision is expensive and unpleasant.

The power of rating platforms is increasing. Rating platforms are internet-based software where individuals can evaluate products. They can share and exchange information about companies. Individuals can publish their opinion for a large audience, accessible for anyone. The rating platform user can evaluate work environments, for example, and make comments on the evaluation. Those comments and evaluations support other users in making a decision. Marketing departments use rating platforms to present new products and to inspire individuals to buy their products (Li & Bernoff 2011; Bernoff & Schadler 2010). Rating platforms constitute a channel for exchanging information which is trusted by other users. Negative reports can damage companies' reputations and lead to economic disaster. The number of evaluations and responses may be an indicator for the quality of the information.

Wom is an important part of human resource management. It is an important channel for providing information to potential candidates (Sander et al. 2015). The information channel is unofficial and can provide exclusive information. Individuals trust information from employees more than official

information from companies. They expect unadorned information because people report their experiences. They describe their daily life via the rating platform. They present reality from their perspective.

Human resource department needs new ways to motivate individuals to apply to their companies. Companies can use this channel for employer branding. The presentation of a company on an employer rating platform is an important factor in attracting potential employees (Sivertzen et al. 2013). The labour market and lack of qualified candidates constitute a problem for organizations. Organizations need qualified employees to be successful. Social media is changing the labour market. This provides opportunities and risks for companies (Sander 2013). New strategies are needed for using social media tools in the employment seeking process. Potential candidates are interested in real information about companies. They like to collect exclusive internal information about future employers, in order to decide whether to apply or not. The additional information improves their decision-making and reassures them that the company is a good employer. Meanwhile employers are looking for information in social networks about potential employees and take informal advice from people they trust.

The word-of-mouth concept

Distribution of information is possible in different channels. There is an official channel to provide information to potential consumer or applicants, for example. This channel is authorized by companies and provides official information. The information presents the opinions of the company and presents the situation mainly in a positive light. Therefore, the company benefits through the distribution of the information. The different channels are summarized in Figure 1.
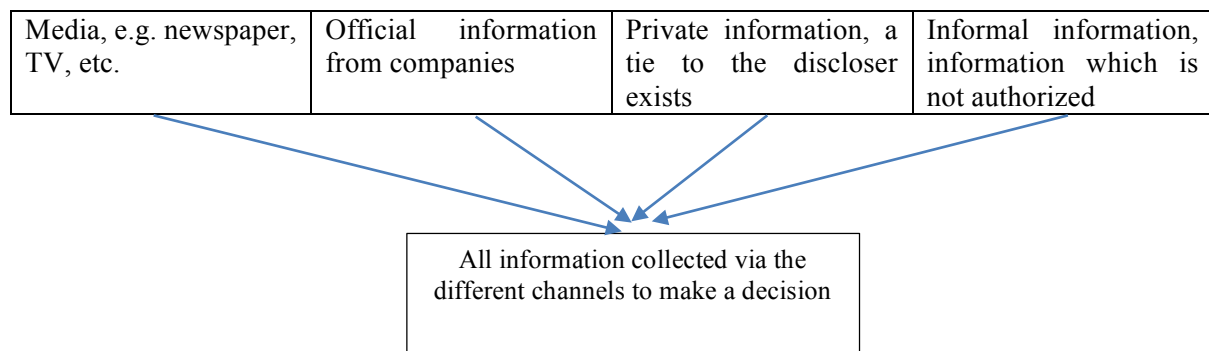

Figure 1. Potential channels for collecting information about employers
Source: created by the authors

Media companies, e.g. newspapers, investigate issues and present their information to a large audience. They earn their money with the information they can provide to individuals; individuals pay for the information. This information channel and the value of the channel depend on the reputation of the media company. The difference between media and *wom* channels is that individuals collaborate with each other, that the collaboration produces information and improves the understanding of context. That is a factor of *wom*. The response to the information provided is an indicator of the quality. Qualitative information gets many responses and is transferred via rating platforms. The individual has the control and power over the information. The company cannot influence the information directly; they can only react to the information if they anticipate it.

Information from a private person or informal information is a kind of *wom*. *Wom* started in social networks. Social network users exchanged information about their experience and knowledge. They recommended products to their friends and presented new possibilities to use products, for example. They have known each other personally and have had experience in exchanging information with each other. They trust the information because they can estimate the value of the information and trustworthiness of the discloser (Granovetter 2005). The density of the social network has had an influence on the exchange of information. The opportunity to get reciprocity for the given information motivates individuals to exchange information or resources. The chance to penalize someone for false information is a factor in using and trusting *wom* (Wang et al. 2016). It is a kind of guarantee if the person takes responsibilities for the information they have provided. This prevents false information.

This information exchange can be explained through social capital theory (Pentland 2014). People exchange their knowledge and experience for personal gain and this is the reason to take part in an employer rating platform, for example. They expect to collect information there if they need information about a company in the future. At the moment they are providing information but maybe they will need other information in the future (Adler & Kwon 2002). The internet is changing the *wom* process, e.g. anonymity is increasing. The mechanism of real social networks works differently in social media. Social media provides new opportunities to exchange information quickly and easily with a large audience. Collecting information about anything is possible. The quantity of information about products is increasing but the quality may be limited. Social network sites, rating platforms and other internet-based tools are an important channel for information exchange (Shu & Chuang 2011; Ngai et al. 2015). The access to beneficial information is a great advantage. Companies and customers can use this new channel. The additional exclusive information is an advantage for rating platform users and the reason to use the platform.

This paper concentrates on employer rating platforms. The platforms are internet websites providing the opportunity to describe and evaluate employers. Using the platforms is quick and easy. They provide information about companies, office environments or company cultures, for example. The current employer, former employer or applicant can evaluate the company regarding employer-relevant issues. This information supports potential candidates in deciding to apply or not to apply. Employer rating platforms use the knowledge and experience of individuals. This information can be used to collect further information about products, for example. The interest of an individual is different from that of marketing or human resource departments. The opinion of individuals is an important issue and constitutes interesting information for other potential users of a product, for example. The information is not biased by company interests (Balaji et al. 2016). The individual who provides this information is responsible for the content. Negative information damages employer branding and is a disadvantage for companies. On the other hand, positive information is a benefit for companies. The information on employer rating platforms influences the decisions of potential candidates and impressions about the company (Relling et al. 2016). The power of information has increased with employer rating platforms. Society is changing to a knowledge-based society and information is the basis of decisions (Himanen 2005). Companies use employer rating platforms and individuals are critical of these platforms. They assume that companies write their own comments to increase their reputation or that former employees write negative comments because they are unsatisfied with their former employer. They are frustrated and write emotional comments from a personal perspective. The information provided on employer rating platforms is a kind of *wom*.

Employer branding and the employment seeking process

Employer branding is a critical issue for the recruitment process. Companies present themselves to potential candidates in such a way as to be attractive for the employees they need. There are different tools for employer branding. Social media increases the opportunities to transfer information to individuals. The content is changing, e.g. videos, text messages or audio messages are possible, for example (Carrillat et al. 2014). Companies can advertise or invite potential candidates to events to present their culture or other relevant issues for employees. It is important for potential candidates to collect information about their future employer. The company has the chance to convey their culture to potential candidates (Bellou et al. 2015). This reduces the danger of mismatch because the candidate is informed about the company. This helps companies and candidates to make a good decision. Social media provides new channels for transferring information about companies. The increasing amount of information makes it difficult to select the best information. The evaluation of comments about companies helps one to anticipate the usefulness of the information (Yan 2011; Sivertzen et al. 2013). This is a positive result for human resource management in motivating candidates to apply and presenting the uniqueness of the company to its environment.

Employer branding is important for the employment seeking process. The first step of the employment seeking process is to investigate information. Information collection is possible via different channels. The channels and information are screened for trustworthiness, relevance and benefit. The trustworthy, beneficial, relevant information is used to make a decision to forward the application and apply or to cancel the employment seeking process. Trust is an important issue for the transfer of information and motivation for action (Burt 2001). This issue explains the importance of

employer branding for companies. The company will only be recommended if their culture and benefits are believed to be favourable. A company's products, leadership style and culture influence the employer brand (Du Preez & Bendixen 2015). Good employer branding needs to present the reality of company life. If the employer branding is too optimistic, it can have negative consequences. Employer rating platforms are a place where individuals can corroborate the benefits companies promise, if the individuals' experience coincides with what the company presents in their official information. Employees who have been at the company have the opportunity to tell the truth because they are no longer involved with the company and do not have to have respect the former employer or expect negative consequences for their behaviour. An employee who provides knowledge and information on employer rating platforms can run into difficulties if the company is not amused by the information. The positive aspect is that people who are not under pressure can report anything without restrictions. The negative aspect is that they may not report accurately about their company. This means there is real information from the perspective of the employees, which can entice individuals to apply. The danger for potential candidates is that the reports on the employer rating platform may be false, that malevolent individuals may use this rating platform to damage an employer brand or to take revenge on their former employer. The privacy and anonymity of the platform presents difficulties. The consequence is that false information providers cannot be penalized. The reputation and trustworthiness of the information provider is difficult to evaluate. This makes it difficult to trust the information.

Method and demographic data

The data were collected in Germany through an online survey in the framework of a project at the University of Ludwigshafen. The participants are all able to use the internet and they all speak German. They need access to the internet because they cannot use employer rating platforms without it. The project evaluated employer rating platforms and addressed the value of information on employer rating platforms. The first question regards the use of employer rating platforms. The use is evaluated with the question "How often do you use employee evaluation platforms to collect information about companies?" on a scale of one for always to six for never. This question elicits feedback on the intensity of use. The next question is "What is your opinion about the information from employer rating platforms?". The participants evaluated four statements on a scale of one for full agreement to six for full disagreement. Such an evaluation scale corresponds to the evaluation scale in German schools. The data obtained in the survey have been evaluated with the main indicators of descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, median, mode, range and standard deviation), LSD ANOVA and the Spearman correlation. The significant results of LSD ANOVA are analysed with cross tables. The demographic data are summarized in Table 1.

The participants are mainly young people who are looking for employment in the near future or currently. They are very experienced with the internet and mainly use social tools, e.g. employer rating platforms, to collect information. Their social status is categorised according to the five stages used to define the current situation of the individual (Kozinets et al. 2010). The majority of the participants are students or employed. In terms of education, they are doing apprenticeships or visiting educational programmes to improve their skills and knowledge to be prepared for the labour market, for example.

Table 1

Distribution of the demographic factors: age, social status, education and employment seeking; results (in %)

Age group	%	Social status	%	Education	%	Employment seeking status	%
under 22 years	5.8	employed	53.4	school degree	6.3	active	13.0
23 to 26	22.7	educational programme	0.8	apprenticeship degree	38.1	passive	19.8
27 to 31	33.3	student	41.2	university degree	49.0	not looking at the moment	66.0
32 to 36	14.7	unemployed	1.8	other	6.5	no answer	1.2
37 to 41	8	other	2.8	N	504	N	500
over 41	15.5	n	502				
N	502						

Source: Data collected from the respondents by Tom Sander

They are not available for the labour market at the moment because they are in training. "Other" comprises people who do not fit into the categories. The majority of the respondents have a university degree or apprenticeship degree. This means the participants are well educated. Companies are interested in skilled candidates and in knowing how to attract such individuals to apply for open positions. The "employment seeking status" describes the behaviour of individuals in identifying employment. They can look actively for employment, searching for open positions, while a passive search means they are not looking for an open position but would react if they were to see an interesting offer or a head hunter were to send them a message, for example. "Not looking at the moment" means they are not interested in new employment opportunities and are satisfied with their current employer. 62.8% of the respondents are female. The answers of 626 respondents are included in the analysis. The respondents are young and well educated. They will be entering the labour market soon and companies are interested in finding highly qualified candidates.

The use of rating platforms

The first question evaluates the frequency of use of employer rating platforms. The respondents demonstrate a clear tendency regarding the use of employer rating platforms in their daily life. Table 2 presents the results.

The use of employer rating platforms among respondents tends toward "never" (the most often indicated evaluation value was 6 – characterised by the mode; half of the respondents gave an evaluation of 5 or lower and half of the respondents gave evaluations of 5 or higher – characterised by the median, the average evaluation was 4.32, although the entire evaluation scale was covered (range 5). The respondents do not use employer rating platforms very often. Maybe they are not familiar or experienced with employer rating platforms or they have a negative opinion about them – for example, that companies write their own comments or that rating platform providers censor comments. Further research is needed to identify the reasons why they are not using employer rating platforms at the moment and to understand what actually influences their decisions. One reason not to use employer rating platforms could be the current situation of the respondents. They are not actively looking for a position or they are in an educational programme. This is the reason to take different demographic factors into consideration.

Table 2

The main statistical indicators for the question "How often do you use employee evaluation platforms to collect information about companies?"

Arithmetic mean	4.32
Median	5
Mode	6
Range	5
Standard deviation	1.789
N	626

Source: table constructed by the authors, evaluation scale 1 – 6, 1 for always to 6 for never

All demographic factors mentioned in the introduction are tested with an LSD ANOVA, except age and gender. The evaluation differences by gender are tested with a t-test and evaluations according to age group are analysed with a Spearman correlation coefficient. The homogeneity of the data has been tested with Levene statistics. The significant relevant results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the LSD ANOVA for employment seeking status (active, passive or not looking at the moment) compared with the question "How often do you use employee evaluation platforms to collect information about companies?"; only relevant factors are presented

(I) Employment Seeking	(J) Employment Seeking	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Active	Passive	-0.432	0.285	0.130	-0.99	0.13
	Not looking at the moment	-1.065	0.242	0.000	-1.54	-0.59
Passive	Active	0.432	0.285	0.130	-0.13	0.99
	Not looking at the moment	-0.633	0.205	0.002	-1.04	-0.23
Not looking at the moment	Active	1.065	0.242	0.000	0.59	1.54
	Passive	0.633	0.205	0.002	0.23	1.04

Source: table created by Tom Sander

The respondents reported their current employment seeking level in the survey, which sought to evaluate if the current situation influences patterns of employment rating platform use. The following answers were possible: "active" employment seeking, "passive" employment seeking and "not looking at the moment" for employment opportunities. The results of the research show that there are significant differences in the use of employer rating platforms. The differences are visible in Figure 2. The situation of individuals influences, in the expected way, the use of employment rating platforms. The figure explains that actively searching individuals have another distribution of responses compared with the two other groups. The results indicate that the current situation is a reason to use employment rating platforms and that there are differences between the groups.
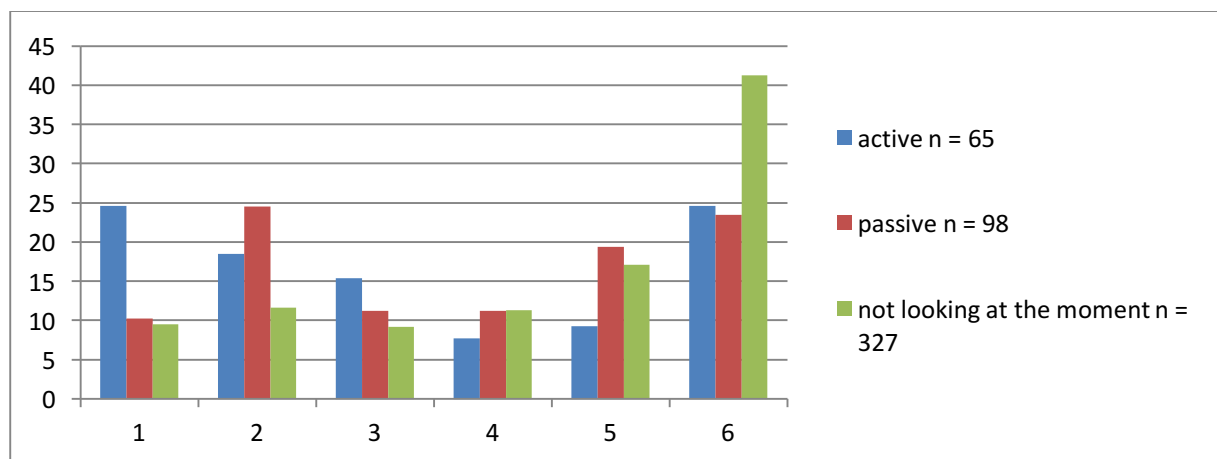

Figure 2. Distribution of respondent evaluations for the statement "How often do you use employee evaluation platforms to collect information about companies?" according to employment seeking status, share of responses (in %)
Source: figure created by Tom Sander, evaluation scale 1 – 6, 1 for always to 6 for never

The human resource management of a company trying to motivate employment seeking candidates with specially required skills cannot use employer rating platforms to motivate this group to apply for an open position, for example. Employer rating platforms are mainly useful for finding individuals who are actively seeking employment.

Power of information on employment rating platforms
The employer rating platform's task is to inform individuals about companies and support the

decision to apply or not to apply at a company. This is the reason for asking the participants about the advantages and use of employer rating platforms.

<div align="right">Table 4</div>

The main statistical indicators of evaluations for the question "What is your opinion about the information from employer rating platforms?", statements evaluated on a of scale 1 – 6; where 1 – full agreement and 6 – full disagreement

Indicators	Employer rating platforms contain different information compared with other opportunities (e.g. company web page, image folder of the company)	Employer rating platforms present only the exclusive opinion of one individual	The decision to apply for a position is supported by additional information from employer rating platforms	The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms
N	530	531	531	529
Mean	2.39	2.18	2.82	3.33
Median	2	2	3	3
Mode	2	1	2	3
Standard Deviation	1.322	1.239	1.317	1.371
Range	5	5	5	5

Source: table constructed by the authors

The participants were asked for their opinion of rating platforms for evaluating companies. The statement that employer rating platforms only present the exclusive opinion of one individual received the highest agreement level with a mode of one and a median of two. The information on the platform is related to the experience of individuals. The motivation to rate a company is not clear and an individual opinion could bias reality. This leads to the statement that employer rating platforms contain different information compared with official information, e.g. from the company web page or image folder or from sponsored events. This statement is rated by respondents with a median of two and a mode of two. The anticipated advantage of rating platforms is additional information for potential candidates. The rating platform user expects different information from the official information. What is more interesting is that the decision to apply or not to apply is influenced by the rating platforms. The additional information influences this decision. This statement is evaluated by respondents with a mode of two and a median of one. The lowest agreement was received by the statement that rating platforms support the decision between two different companies: the platform is the reason for a decision for one company as opposed to another company. The respondent evaluation mode and median are three.

The authors are interested in analysing the influence of different demographic factors. The first step is a Spearman correlation between age and the statements. There are two significant relevant results, but the correlations are weak. The decision to apply is influenced by age and influences the applicant to apply or not to apply. The expectation of identifying interesting information is influenced by age as well. The result can be logically explained by the different experience with rating platforms on the internet depending on age.

Table 5

Spearman correlation coefficient between evaluations of the analysed statements and age distribution to analyse the influence of age on the statements (only significant relevant results presented)

Indicators	Employer rating platforms contain different information compared with other opportunities (e.g. company web page, image folder of the company).	The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms
Spearman correlation coefficient	0.101	0.093
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.025	0.039
n	491	490

Source: table created by Tom Sander

Young people are more experienced and have more knowledge about internet platforms than older generations. The other two statements are not influenced by age on a significant relevant level.

The evaluation according to gender is another demographic factor and is analysed with a t-test to identify significant differences between gender regarding the statements. The statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" provides a significant difference between male and female respondents. The statement fulfils the requirement for a t-test and is the only statement on a relevant significant level.

The distribution for the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" divided into women and men is presented in Figure 3. The tendency of men to full agreement is stronger than the tendency of women. This provides the result that men are more influenced than women. But both have a majority of respondents in the first three stages.

Table 6

T-test to analyse the influence of age on the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" (only significant relevant results are presented)

Indicators	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.34	0.56	1.93	487	0.05	0.24	0.12	-0.004	0.49
Equal variances not assumed			1.90	365	0.05	0.24	0.12	-0.007	0.49

Source: table created by Tom Sander

The results indicate that women are more influenced by employment rating platforms than men regarding the decision between two different companies. This is interesting information for human resource management: that men use employment rating platforms to make a decision more often than women.
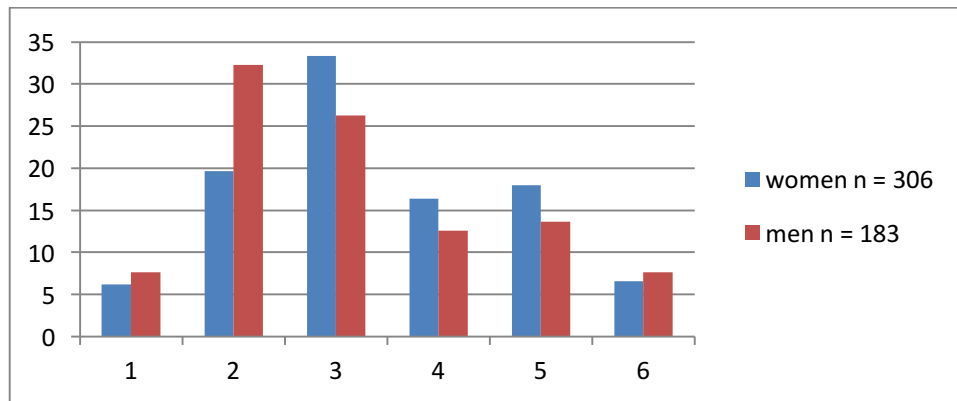
Figure 3. Distribution of responses by gender for the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" (in %)
Source: figure created by Tom Sander, evaluation scale 1-6, 1 – full agreement to 6 – full disagreement

Different educational degrees influence individuals' behaviour. The findings indicate that with regard to the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms", there are significant differences between those with a school degree and those with a university degree. A significant difference between those with an apprenticeship degree and those with another degree does not exist. The largest difference in educational level is between a school degree and a university degree and may be a reason for the significant difference.

Table 7

LSD ANOVA to analyse the differences between educational degrees (university degree, school degree, apprenticeship degree or other) and the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" (only relevant results are presented)

(I) (J) Educational degree	(J) Educational degree	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
school degree	apprenticeship degree	-0.379	0.259	0.144	-0.89	0.13
	university degree	-0.092	0.255	0.718	-0.59	0.41
	other	-0.326	0.342	0.341	-10.00	0.35
apprenticeship degree	school degree	0.379	0.259	0.144	-0.13	0.89
	university degree	0.287	0.132	0.030	0.03	0.55
	other	0.054	0.263	0.838	-0.46	0.57
university degree	school degree	0.092	0.255	0.718	-0.41	0.59
	apprenticeship degree	-0.287	0.132	0.030	-0.55	-0.03
	other	-0.233	0.259	0.367	-0.74	0.27
other	school degree	0.326	0.342	0.341	-0.35	10.00
	apprenticeship degree	-0.054	0.263	0.838	-0.57	0.46
	university degree	0.233	0.259	0.367	-0.27	0.74

Source: table created by Tom Sander

The tendency of individuals with a school degree is mainly toward full agreement compared with the other educational levels. Those with a university degree have a mode of three and a mainly normal distribution. There is not a strong tendency toward full agreement compared with those with a school

degree or apprenticeship degree. The university degree category has the most respondents on three.
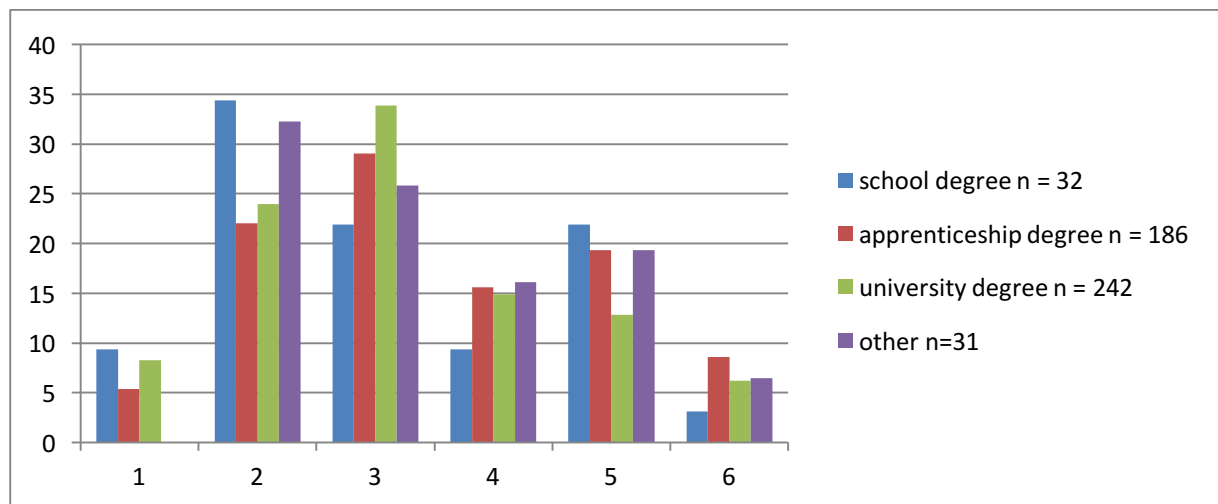

Figure 4. Distribution of evaluations by education level for the statement "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms" (in %)
Source: figure created by Tom Sander, evaluation on a scale of 1 – 6, where 1 – full agreement and 6 – full disagreement

That means that educational level influences the use of employment rating platforms. The influence depends significantly on the kind of degree. Human resource management needs to know that for school degree-level respondents the decision is mainly influenced by employer rating platforms. The higher the educational level, the lower the influence of employer rating platforms on the decision to apply or not.

CONCLUSIONS

Employer rating platforms are important tools for potential candidates and companies. Individuals use employer rating platforms to learn about employers. It is important for human resource departments to know that they can use these tools to motivate individuals to apply or to decide on applying. Human resource managers at companies should monitor employer rating platforms and use the comments to improve their employer brand. They must improve their benefits, environment and other employee-related issues if they wish to get a positive evaluation on employer rating platforms. The criticism and comments on the platforms should be regarded as the perspectives of individuals.

Employer rating platforms are not used very often. Use of employer rating platforms is related to employment seeking status. Individuals who are actively looking for employment have the strongest tendency toward "always" and respondents "not looking at the moment" have the strongest tendency toward "never". There are significant differences between those "not looking at the moment" and passive and active employment seeking individuals. This result is an indicator that employer rating platforms are a good tool to motivate active employment seeking individuals to apply.

Individuals are aware that rating platforms present the perspectives of individuals: that the information may be biased. The anticipated benefit of employer rating platforms is that additional information is provided, that the opinions of companies are not provided, that individuals have the chance to get an impression from an insider, the perspective of an employee, even if it has to be regarded as a personal opinion. The evaluation and response to comments or the number of similar comments may be an indication of the validity of the information. The results indicate that individuals use employer rating platforms to decide about applying, that employer rating information is the basis for deciding between companies. This is important information for human resource departments. Given the power and influence of employer rating platforms, it is important to know that this tool can be used successfully.

Demographic factors influence the use of employer rating platforms. Age has a weak significant Spearman correlation coefficient for the statements "Employer rating platforms contain different information compared with other opportunities (e.g. company web page, image folder of the company)"

and "The decision between different companies is simplified with the support of employer evaluation platforms". This means there is a relation to collecting information and to deciding about their application. Experience is an important factor in using a tool and can explain the weak correlation indicated by the correlation coefficient. The t-test presents a significant result for differences in these evaluations between men and women. The statement regarding decisions between two companies has significant differences. Men agree more strongly that they use employer rating platforms to decide between companies. Education influences the use of employer rating platforms. More highly educated individuals with a university degree and a school degree have significant differences in their evaluations. The investigation regarding employment seeking status does not provide a statistically relevant result.

Employer rating platforms are an important tool for human resource departments to attract individuals to apply. The finding is that employer rating platforms influence individuals. The platforms are used to collect information and to decide about applying. Further research is needed to find out the motivation and reason to use employer rating platforms. The mechanism of employer rating platforms needs further investigation.

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