‘Your school tie matters more than gaining a degree’ if you want to be an estate agent

Estate agencies wanting to hire new staff are probably more interested in the type of school the applicants attended rather than whether they went on to gain a degree suggests a new study. Researchers examined the attitudes of employers at residential estate agents and found that what really counts are the soft skills formed at secondary school, and a public schooling gives prospective applicants a distinct advantage at interview for a job in the property market.

The researchers believe this study is the first in-depth examination of the work and employment of estate agents and one of the few studies to examine at the workplace level a non-graduate occupation that is increasingly being colonised by graduates.

In the online employers survey (n=166) only 2% said that a degree was needed to get the job. Greater emphasis (52%) was placed on school-level qualifications. Strikingly, 34% said no qualifications were needed to get the job.

The paper ‘Social Skills Matter: the case of estate agents’ is being presented at the British Sociological Association Conference in Leeds on 13 April. The study is by researchers from Oxford, Strathclyde and Sydney universities working for the ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and the Scottish Centre for Employment Research (SCER). The research is drawn from a wider study involving a national online survey of estate agents managers, employers and employees. Interviews were also conducted with key industry representatives and 23 company case studies in both England and Scotland of mid-market and upper-market corporate and independent estate agents.

Dr Susan James, lead researcher of the project and Associate Director of SKOPE, said: ‘The Coalition Government’s expressed aim is to promote equality of opportunity and emphasis has been placed on expanding higher education as a means of delivering a meritocratic society. However, data from the Office for National Statistics reveals that the expansion of higher education coupled with an economic downturn has led to more graduates entering previously non-graduate occupations. Yet despite the availability of a growing pool of graduates, some employers still say degrees are not required as they are looking for soft skills that are usually developed through schooling and family upbringing.’

One manager in a mid-market corporate estate agency said: ‘You wouldn’t need a degree to obtain employment with us.’ Another in the upper market corporate segment said: ‘I would probably look at their qualifications and degree last.’

Across all market segments of residential sales estate agency employers described ‘soft skills’ as being ‘well-spoken’ and ‘smartly dressed’. Employers in the upper market segments stressed that private schools were the best place for developing these skills. One manager
in an upper market independent agency stated: 'If your target market in Edinburgh is the doctors and the lawyers and the fund managers, they're probably just going to have a better rapport. I mean you can tell in Edinburgh which school or whether somebody went to a fee-paying school or not just by listening to them on the telephone.'

Dr James added: 'Faced with a bigger pool of job applicants, employers appear to be making a rational choice in hiring graduates, but our study also reveals that some employers perceive the degree itself to be irrelevant. The government has just increased university tuition fees but this study suggests that that many new graduates are now moving down the occupational ladder. We need to question the extent to which expanded higher education is creating a more level playing field in terms of getting jobs. This study suggests a degree is being trumped by social class and the old school tie in some cases.'

For more information or to arrange an interview, Dr Susan James can be contacted on mobile: 07814 026 493 or Email: susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk

Notes for Editors:

*SKOPE

Further information about SKOPE can be found at http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk/

*Information for editors on the industry

The estate agency industry comprises commercial and residential property sales and lettings. To date there are no reliable data on employment in the industry. In England most residential home sales are undertaken by estate agents; in Scotland most residential home sales by solicitors (who are graduates), though with a sizable share undertaken by estate agents. The industry has a poor public reputation and there have been repeated (but typically unheeded) calls for better regulation of and training within the industry. Asset Skills is the industry sector skills council and works to improve the skills of the workforce, which in turn it hopes will raise performance, productivity and competitiveness.

Information for editors on the research design

The research is being conducted by a team from the ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) at Oxford University and the Scottish Centre for Employment Research (SCER) at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. The research is funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (the ESRC). The research is supported by Asset Skills.

The research covers England and Scotland (which have different legal regulations), corporate and independent estate agents and estate agents operating in the mid-market and upper-market segments. The research involves a national survey of estate agents managers/employers and employees. There are also interviews with key industry stakeholders and 23 company case studies in both England and Scotland of mid-market and upper-market corporate and independent estate agents. The BSA paper reports research findings from the Scottish and English case studies.

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