

Workplace Qualities: Views of College of Business Undergraduate and
Graduate Students

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Introduction

The literature has been abundant in recent years concerning qualities needed by college graduates for employment. What qualities are important for college of business graduates? Do business students know what qualities are important? Are we teaching these skills and competencies in our business programs that are required for employment? What do college of business students deemed as the most essential qualities for employment?

Problem Statement

The problem of this study was to determine the views of undergraduate and graduate college of business students concerning needed skills and competencies for initial employment.

Methods

A questionnaire was developed and administered to junior ,senior, and graduate level students enrolled in the college of business. The questionnaire was administered in only face-to-face classes. The online sections were not surveyed. The questionnaire contained 26 different qualities that student were asked to evaluate. Students were asked to evaluate each of the qualities as “extremely essential,” “highly essential,” “essential,” “not essential,” or “undecided.”

Review of Literature

Introduction

As graduates consider their job search strategy, they typically begin by asking themselves, “What should I look for in a potential employer?” Expectations of current graduates are high. They want a prestigious organization, excellent pay and benefits, great co-workers, and a culture in which they fit well. Most of all, they want a job they enjoy.

In these challenging economic times, perhaps a more appropriate question for graduates to ask is “What will employers look for in me as a potential employee?” Like the graduates, today’s employers look for very specific employability attributes in potential employees. The literature reflects that the ability to communicate well verbally and in writing is an attribute that consistently appears at or near the top of the list of employability attributes.

A recent National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) study (NACE, 2009) noted that employers initially screen for the basic requirements of an appropriate major and coursework with a grade point average of 3.0 or better. Beyond that, according to Marilyn Mackes, NACE Executive Director, employers value “good communication skills, a good work ethic, ability to work in teams, and initiative” (p. 1). Additionally, the study noted that employers value relevant work experience and demonstrated leadership ability, thus giving a nod of approval to internships and cooperative work experience.

In a collaborative effort, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management conducted a study entitled “Are They Really Ready to Work?” (2006). The study focused on identification of attributes of a successful employee in the 21st century workplace and addressed employment readiness of new high school graduates, two-year program graduates, and four-year college graduates with regard to the identified attributes. Over 400 employers across the United States were surveyed, with both human resources and other senior executives included in the survey sample. Among the attributes rated “very important” by the surveyed employers were “professionalism / work ethic, written and oral communication, teamwork / collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and ethics / social responsibility” (p.231). With regard to communication, 93% of the student respondents included in the study concurred with employers

that communication is a “very important” employability attribute. “ A notable 27.8% of four-year college graduates in the study, however, were rated by the study measurement as deficient in written communication” (p. 41).

In his article “Skills Employers Want and New Graduates Lack: Bridging the Gap” (2009), Michael Kemp emphasized that employers want employees who can work together and get things done. Unfortunately, “they find these skills lacking in many college graduates. “They practically weep over college graduates’ poor writing skills” (p. 1) and desire strong communication skills. Further, Kemp notes that employers find new graduates lacking in “professionalism, maturity, business etiquette, knowledge of proper attire, ability to meet deadlines, and realistic career goals” (p. 1).

Ingbretsen (2009) in his study reiterated the findings of the 2009 job survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, noting that employers seek “communication skills (verbal and written), a strong work ethic, teamwork skills (works well with others), and analytical skills, in that order” (p. 1). Additionally, Ingbretson emphasized the importance of attitude. Businesses want to hire employees with genuine and positive attitudes. The saying is “hire attitude, train skill. Skills can be taught much easier than a poor, negative attitude can be changed. Business schools are not emphasizing enough the importance of attitude” (p. 1).

A comprehensive work by Ruben and DeAngelis (1999) entitled “Succeeding at Work: Skills and Competencies Needed by College and University Graduates in the Workplace” provided biographical information and summarized 45 professional studies published between 1992 and 1998. Their review revealed most agreement on the need for good communication skills.

While the Ruben and DeAngelis study affirmed the need for good communication skills, Stevens (2007) in her article “How Satisfied Are Employers with Graduates’ Business Communication Skills” affirmed a concomitant result -- employers find current graduates deficient in this area. Her study included a survey of 104 Silicon Valley employers. She found that “employers in Silicon Valley are not fully satisfied with the business communications skills of new hire graduates (p. 1). Employers in her study expressed a need for strong communication skills as well as writing skills.

The findings of Porterfield (2004) supported employer views reported in other studies regarding the importance of communication skills in employees. Porterfield’s study addressed a more global concern about business school preparation of graduates for the workplace. The Fortune 500 human resources directors surveyed in her study felt that four-year colleges were doing an adequate job of preparing undergraduates for the corporate workplace. The respondents collectively pointed out, however, that “business students lack the ability to write clearly” (2004, p. 51). They noted that “students should develop communication skills, develop realistic expectations for work, understand work teams, and appreciate diversity” (2004, p. 52).

Summary

The current high unemployment rate provides employers with a large number of job applicants for a small number of open positions. The prospects of gainful employment for recent graduates are profoundly affected by graduate competencies with regard to attributes highly rated by employers. The literature suggests that employers place high value on a range of attributes including a good work ethic, the ability to work in teams, initiative, leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving. Notably, the literature suggests broad agreement that good written and verbal communication skills are very much sought after skills in the workplace. Sadly, the

literature also provides substantial evidence that current graduates are notably deficient in written and verbal communication skills. It is comforting to note that one study indicated that business schools at four-year institutions are doing an adequate job of preparing graduates for the corporate workplace. Nevertheless, the body of work suggests an on-going need and perhaps a renewed and expanded emphasis on equipping business school students with good written and verbal communication skills.