

Workplace Qualities: Views of College of Business Deans and  
Human Resource Managers

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As business students consider their job search strategy, they usually 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. Most of all, they want a job they enjoy.

In this competitive and challenging economic era, 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 desired employability attributes. Other attributes that may be considered desirable by employers are understanding systems, using information, utilizing resources, working in the teams, and working with the technology.

### **Review of the Literature**

A recent National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) study (NACE, 2008) 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. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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, including both human resources and other senior executives. 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. Students were also surveyed with regard to communication and 93% of the student respondents concurred with employers that communication is a “very important” employability attribute.

Ingbretsen’s findings (2009), agreed with those of the 2009 job survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. He noted that employers seek communication skills (verbal and written), a strong work ethic, teamwork skills (works well with others), and analytical skills, in that order. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of attitude. Businesses want to hire employees with genuine and positive attitudes. They want to hire attitude and then train for the skills. Needed skills can be taught much easier than a poor, negative attitude can be changed. He stated that business schools are not adequately emphasizing the importance of attitude.

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 cite college graduates’ poor writing skills and indicate the desire of industry for 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.

A comprehensive work by Ruben and DeAngelis (1999) provided information for workplace qualities by summarizing 45 professional studies published between 1992 and 1998. Their review of these studies revealed that most agreed on the need for good communication skills.

Stevens (2007) in her article “How Satisfied Are Employers with Graduates’ Business Communication Skills” her findings affirmed that employers find current graduates deficient in communication skills. 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 newly hired graduates. 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 that business students lack the ability to write clearly. They noted that students should develop communication skills, develop realistic expectations for work, understand work teams, and appreciate diversity.

A recent study found that verbal and written communication were ranked relatively high in surveys of business college deans and human resource managers, but that “integrity in communications” and “confidentiality in handling communications” were ranked by both groups as the highest communications competencies needed for business school graduates by both groups. (English, Manton, Walker & Brodnax, 2008).

While most employers recognize the importance of graduates' personal characteristics, there is little agreement on the balance expected between these and their discipline specific technical knowledge (Harvey, Burrows & Green, 1992). Various authors have proposed a number of competencies required or expected of graduates. For example, Maes, Weldy and Icenogle (1997), consider oral communication, problem-solving skills and self-motivation to be the three most important competencies required of graduates. Stasz (1997) likewise sees problem-solving, teamwork, communication skills, and personal qualities, as the most important competencies, but suggests that the workplace context determines their relative importance. Joseph and Joseph (1997), in a survey of 280 New Zealand graduate employers, found the top ranked competencies in descending order were: willingness to learn; having a positive attitude; being motivated; having good communication skills; and, possessing the ability to work independently.

Weisz (1999) found evidence of a link between degree programs that included work-based cooperative education and graduate employment, and found that employers expect generic competencies to be developed prior to employment. Today's college students are expected to learn work related content at a faster rate than ever before. They are expected to quickly develop job related technical skills and the people skills necessary to succeed on the job. (Hofstrand, 1996; Shivpuri & Kim, 2004).

As demonstrated, there have been studies of workplace qualities that employers consider needed or desired in business students, but there is scant information on graduate and undergraduate business students' perceptions of the characteristics that they believe are required to secure job position.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this study was to determine and compare the views college of business deans and human resource managers on the qualities or characteristics needed for entry into the workplace. The perceptions of college of business deans and human resource managers on what qualities are important in obtaining a job are important so that student views align with reality in the marketplace. The results of the study will also be important to college of business instructors so that they will be able to assist students in appropriately identifying those work characteristics that are truly important to obtaining a position.

### **Problem/Methods**

The problem of this study was to determine and compare the views of college of business deans and human resource managers concerning the most important workplace qualities. A questionnaire was developed and mailed to college of business deans and to human resource managers of the 150 largest companies in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. The questionnaire contained 26 different qualities that deans and human resource manager were asked to evaluate.

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