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Survey reveals the skills employers covet

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Employers say recent graduates are ill-prepared for today's workplace
From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

Primary Topic Channel: [21st Century skills](#)

As the baby boom generation slowly exits the U.S. workplace, a new survey of employers from a consortium of business research organizations finds the incoming generation sorely lacking in much-needed workplace skills--both basic academic and more advanced "applied" skills, according to a report circulated at the State Educational Technology Directors Leadership Summit last week (see main story).

The report is based on a detailed survey of 431 human-resource officials that was conducted earlier this year by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. Its objective was to examine employers' views on the readiness of new entrants to the U.S. workforce--recently hired graduates from high schools, two-year colleges or technical schools, and four-year colleges.

"The future workforce is here, and it is ill-prepared," concludes the report.

Business leaders report that while the three "Rs" are still fundamental to every employee's ability to do the job, applied skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and communication also are essential for success. In fact, at all educational levels, these applied skills trump basic knowledge skills in importance in the view of employers. The survey found, however, that too many new entrants to the workforce are not adequately prepared in these important skills.

For example, 70 percent of survey respondents cited deficiencies among incoming high school graduates in "applied" skills, such as professionalism and work ethic, defined as "demonstrating personal accountability [and]

effective work habits, [such as] punctuality, working productively with others, time and workload management."

In addition, more than half (58 percent) of employers said critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are "very important" for incoming high school graduates' successful job performance, yet nearly three-quarters of respondents (70 percent) rated recently hired high school graduates as deficient in critical thinking.

Furthermore, when asked how their hiring practices will change over the next five years:

- 28 percent of employers project that their companies will reduce hiring of new entrants with only a high school diploma;
- 50 percent said the percentages of two-year college graduates they hire would increase;
- Nearly 60 percent said their hires of four-year college graduates would increase; and
- 42 percent said their hires of post-graduates would increase.

"This study should serve as an alert to educators, policy makers, and those concerned with U.S. economic competitiveness that we may be facing a skills shortage," said Susan R. Meisinger, president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management. "In a knowledge-based economy, a talented workforce with communication and critical-thinking skills is necessary for organizations and the U.S. to be successful."

The findings show an especially large gap in writing skills. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of incoming high school graduates are viewed as deficient in basic English writing skills, including grammar and spelling. And, when asked about readiness with respect to applied skills for the workplace, the greatest deficiency was reported in written communications (memos, letters, complex technical reports), and in professionalism and work ethic. Eighty-one percent of survey participants said their high school graduate hires were deficient in written communications.

Poor writing also is a problem among both two-year and four-year college graduates: Nearly half of all survey participants (47 percent) report that two-year college graduates are deficient in this skill.

Looking toward the future, nearly three-fourths of survey participants ranked "creativity/innovation" as among the top five applied skills projected to increase in importance for future graduates.

In addition, knowledge of foreign languages, cultures, and global markets will become increasingly important for future graduates entering the U.S. workforce. When asked to project the changing importance of several knowledge and skill needs over the next five years, 63 percent of survey participants cited foreign languages as increasing in importance more than any other basic knowledge area or skill. And, in separate questions about emerging content areas, half of respondents cited the use of "non-English languages as a tool for understanding other nations, markets, and cultures," while 53 percent selected "understanding of global markets and the economic and cultural impacts of globalization."

A few bright spots

On a less pessimistic note, the workforce readiness of high school graduates was reported as adequate by a majority of survey participants in three areas considered critical for current and future workplace needs: information technology, teamwork, and diversity.

"The adequacy of preparation in these areas is encouraging, as all three--diversity, teamwork, and technology--are areas where business leaders, educators, and communities have focused unified energy and resources in recent years," said Donna Klein, president and CEO of Corporate Voices for Working Families. "These results suggest that when a particular skill is viewed uniformly as critical and is targeted, success and progress [are] possible."

In addition, incoming two-year and four-year college graduates are much better prepared for the entry-level jobs they seek to fill, but relatively small percentages meet standards of excellence. While the majority of employers said that both two- and four-year college graduates are adequately prepared, relatively few rated two- and four-year college graduates as excellently prepared (10 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

"One message of this study to educators, policy makers, and those concerned with U.S. economic competitiveness is that new entrants to the

U.S. workforce are not demonstrating levels of excellence necessary to compete successfully in the face of rising global labor market challenges," said Meisinger. "The importance of learning to communicate in writing and orally is paramount. Communication is a critical skill in the workplace, and one that many new entrants lack."

Linda Barrington, research director at the Conference Board and one of the report's authors, concluded: "This report card makes it clear that as competitive pressures from globalization continue to mount, America's youth must be more intensely prepared for employment if reality is going to match expectations."

Links:

The Conference Board

<http://www.conference-board.org>

Corporate Voices for Working Families

<http://www.cvworkingfamilies.org>

Partnership for 21st Century Skills

<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>

Society for Human Resource Management

<http://www.shrm.org>

<http://www.eschoolnews.com>

