

Workers' Job Skills Criticized in Report

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Those hired at entry level found to be unprepared. Insufficient academic skills among entry-level workers as well as inadequate abilities to work in teams, think critically and communicate could imperil the success of America's youth and the competitiveness of the U.S. economy, according to a report issued October 2, 2006. "The future workforce is here, and it is ill-prepared," concludes the report prepared by a national consortium of business research organizations. The report was based on a detailed survey of 431 human resources officials across the country.

Essentially, HR managers give poor grades to their entry-level hires, and they implore business leaders, educators and policy-makers to work together to improve the readiness of the work force. The report, "Are They Really Ready to Work?," is a joint project of the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. The study includes results from both an in-depth survey conducted during April and May 2006 and interviews with a sampling of a dozen HR and other senior executives. In addition, a workforce readiness report card is included which provides a summary of the basic knowledge and applied skills that are either "deficient" or "excellent" in those areas that employer respondents rate as "very important".

The research report defines Workforce Readiness by asking employer respondents:

1. Whether or not the skill levels that new entrants are currently bringing to their jobs are deemed "excellent," "adequate," or "deficient,"
2. What basic knowledge and applied skills they consider "very important," "important," or "not important." Basic knowledge refers to the academic subjects and skills acquired in school. Applied skills refer to those that enable new entrants to use what they learned in school to perform in the workplace.
3. How the importance of these skills may change over the next five years,
4. What emerging content areas are considered "most critical" over the next five years, and
5. What are the nature and costs of remedial training or initiatives, if basic skills are lacking. The data are typically presented throughout the report separately for high school, two-year college/technical school, and four-year college levels.

Written communications ranked highest of all deficiencies among new employees. More than 80% of the respondents said the high school graduates they hired had insufficient writing skills, compared with 47% for two-year and technical college graduates and 28% for four-year college grads.

About 70% of the employers found recently hired high school graduates lacking in personal accountability and effective work habits, including punctuality, time management and being able to work productively with others. At the same time, the HR

executives said they're seeking higher skills in foreign languages, creativity and problem solving.

The report provides a Workforce Readiness Report Card presents information on each of the three educational levels considered in the study. Employers expect young people to arrive in the workplace with a set of basic and applied skills, and the Workforce Readiness Report Card makes clear that the reality is not matching expectations.

. The Workforce Readiness Report Card for new entrants with a high school diploma does not have a single item in the Excellence List. All 10 skills that a majority of employer respondents rate as "very important" to workforce success are on the Deficiency List.

. For two-year college-educated entrants, one "very important" applied skill-Information Technology Application-appears on the Excellence List while seven skills appear on the Deficiency List.

. Only for the four-year college-educated entrants to the workforce is the Excellence List longer than the Deficiency List on the Report Card.

Minnesota Future Work editor note: This report and its entire list of necessary "basic and applied skills" provides an excellent opportunity for high schools and two year colleges to work together to prepare students to exceed the necessary skill requirements.

The gap is growing between employer expectations and applicants' competency, which should compel more businesses to get involved in the education system, said Van Walling, vice president and area manager for CH2M Hill engineering. Walling is co-chairman of the Systems Now conference at Discovery World today. The annual conference showcases successful partnerships among businesses, schools and the public, aimed at promoting youth participation in science, technology, engineering and math. That sort of collaborative approach can help produce better workers, said Walling, whose firm has been working with elementary math and science classes at Cass Street School for six years. "I honestly believe that we need that kind of connectivity to ground each other and to stay in touch. The bottom line is we need them and they need us," Walling said. "I am of the firm opinion that these problems cannot be solved by money alone."

Sister Joel Read, co-chairwoman of the education committee of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, said employers have long griped about the quality of job applicants, though rarely detailed the deficiencies. "It's not enough to complain about it. It just isn't," said Read, retired president of Alverno College. "Teaching is not a profession that's held in high regard by the business community, and I think it's come to roost, so to speak," Read said. Much as a company would work with a supplier to improve components it found inadequate, Read said, employers must help educators instead of just criticizing them.

The entire report "Are They Really Ready to Work?" is available at

http://www.conference-board.org/pdf_free/BED-06-Workforce.pdf