



A Walk Down Main Street

Small Business and Other Employers Talk About What They Want in New Employees

A Summary of the Employability Report Card Project

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An Alarming Walk Down Main Street

The Survey of Employability by Parent-Driven Schools

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Everyone has their own opinions on how best to educate the next generation of students for the workforce. What educators frequently fail to take into account are the voices on Main Street – predominantly small business and other employers talking in their own words about what they want in new employees.

Recently, Parent Driven Schools and IEM launched an internet survey to gather views from these small businesses and employers. Those who would like to participate may still do so by going to the Parent Driven Schools website and clicking on the “Take the Latest Survey” button.

While the survey is still open, a pattern reflecting this voice of Main Street is already emerging in the first group of 100+ participants. In this report you’ll find a summary of the most important findings to date, with updates to follow as more data is gathered. The main conclusion many people will likely draw—obvious from the data—

is that Main Street’s employers are NOT satisfied with the educational preparation of current job applicants. Too frequently they are suggesting serious gaps in the skills and work habits applicants have gained in their journey through the education system.

Despite the large number of dollars poured so far into the K-12 system to build basic or core skill sets, employers are far from satisfied. Parents and communities are also becoming vocal in their alarm about the gaps in the ‘product’ of this system, its graduates and school children. Alternatives to traditional education, as well as repair work in such obvious areas as math and science, are being tried. Clearly these experiments and attempts to remedy the problems are to be encouraged. Meanwhile, employers impatiently await results, as do more and more parents.

The collector of this data – and the author of this article – is an adjunct faculty member of the Psychology faculty of Wayne State University’s Graduate School, Michigan’s only urban public research university, and also on the adjunct faculty of Central Michigan University. A licensed Michigan Psychologist, he received his graduate training in psychology and research at Yale and Case Western Reserve Universities.

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The Main Finding

Overall Educational Preparation is Viewed with Alarm by Main Street's Employers

Applicants are frequently not satisfying the overall needs of Main Street employers for educationally prepared employees. Only a third (35.6%) of 121 employers responding say they are Satisfied or Highly Satisfied with the educational preparation of current job applicants. The rest rate today's applicants So-so at best (50.4%) or say they are Dissatisfied (14.0%).

In particular, dissatisfaction with the education preparation provided by Public Education is alarming. About one fifth of all employers (22.5%) say they are either Dissatisfied or Highly Dissatisfied with the overall educational preparation of these applicants. Dissatisfaction – using the same statistic - by Main Street employers with applicants from Private Education of all types is only 3.4%.

Some of the respondents' comments are particularly revealing:

"It is very surprising and disappointing the number of people who are unable to pass an entry level (Gas Company) test."

"These people coming to us have no personal skills in how to show up to work, being on time, presentation, etc."

"Our businesses complain about all applicants across the board."

"High school applicants don't have soft skills, the basics of greeting people and answering a phone, to dressing properly."

"Many applicants lack basic business skills..."

"The candidates are not prepared, even with interviewing skills."

"In my experience I have found that candidates educated through the private schools possess a lot more self-discipline and better problem-solving skills, overall."

"70% of our applicants have below average reading and writing skills..."

"Potential employees are sorely deficient in language skills; grammar and writing skills are substandard even from the good candidates. Math skills are borderline from all but the best."

"I find a lack of responsibility, dependability and initiative..."

"English, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, etc. – poor. Math and critical thinking – poor."

Are you looking for a life-long learner with your next hire? Visit ParentDrivenSchools.com and order your copy of our inspirational documentary of how parents and students are working together to overcome obstacles to become life-long learners. Available for purchase Fall 2009.



Additional Findings

Six Core Technical Skills Are Most Frequently Lacking, Employers Say

Survey responders were asked, “What do you most need that you are having trouble finding in your applicant pool?” While there were many categories emerging, from content analysis of their open-ended comments, we’ve broken down the top six categories, with examples, in frequency order below. Many skills seem alarmingly basic.

1. Written and oral communication skills

Survey respondents seem to be simply asking for a reasonable, basic set of written and oral communication skills for entry-level technical work. A disturbing number of recent job applicants seem to lack even the ability to read and write:

“The ability to read and speak English.”

“Good speaking skills – can answer a phone properly, good listeners...”

“Writing skills, grammar, punctuation.”

“Composing a letter with proper English.”

“Basic spelling.”

“Vocabulary – most have limited vocabulary and have trouble understanding or communicating basic instructions.”

“Writing skills – the ability to formulate coherent sentences that are spelled correctly in an organized way.”

“Basic communications skills, verbal and written.”

“Penmanship – not everything can be typed. It is very important that I be able to read the handwritten labels of test container, random bottles sitting in the lab...”

2. Basic or entry-level computer skills

Survey respondents seem to be asking for common, standard or basic-level Microsoft Office and Internet proficiencies:

“Internet research (skills)...”

“Excel Spreadsheets and how to use them in everyday office tasks.”

“Know how to insert a formula in a spreadsheet, sort data and create graphs.”

“Using a calculator.”

“Computer production/internet design skills.”

“...the ability to use an industry standard tool such as Microsoft Project.”

“Basic Computer Skills in Business Application – i.e., an appropriate level of Microsoft Office Skills.”

“True computer skills – not ‘device’ skills, but the ability to work with professional software.”

3. Math skills

Survey respondents say they have to struggle to get a basic level of practical or everyday mathematical skills:

“Simple math to give back change at front desk for maps, etc.”

“Math skills – (used in) basic bookkeeping and accounting”

“Statistical analysis skills.”

“Basic math skills like percentages and fractions.”

“Math – basic ability to convert units, simple chemistry calculations, working with fractions and percents, understanding the answer ‘makes sense’.”

“Math skills – need to be able to count.”

“Math – being able to double or half a recipe; basic calculations – not ‘estimation’ math.”

“Mathematics – the ability to use math skills in a practical setting”

4. Core working habits and a good work ethic

Respondents to our Technical Skills question again find themselves begging for the very basics - good work habits and ethics:

"Responsibility – Be on time, turn work in on time, be prepared."

"Accountability – people to do what they say."

"Work etiquette – expected performance, appropriate dress, on-time, safe behavior."

"Lack a sense of the appropriate; very unaware of surroundings."

"Work ethic – show up on time on Fridays and Mondays."

"Little initiative, much hand-holding."

"Responsibility when mistakes are made."

"Being able to follow through on what was promised."

"Attitude – things are not (just) handed to them, they must earn it through hard work."

"Pride in work is lacking."

"Punctuality – shows up on time and stays until tasks are completed."

"Time management skills – lots of wasted time."

"..initiative – they can look for what needs to be done; they do things outside their job description if asked."

5. People skills

Respondents seem to be asking for the basic, everyday people skills needed to run a business and handle customers:

"Proper etiquette (on the telephone)."

"...people skills – students are not well trained in working with peers to get a job done."

"Social skills - ability to interact with affluent/educated clients and families."

"...applicants lack of basic interpersonal and customer service skills."

"Emotional intelligence."

"People skills – ability to successfully interact with and respect co-workers and managers."

"Social skills."

"Team skills needed to work as a team."

"Handling clients and customers."

6. Core critical thinking and problem-solving skills

Survey respondents say they require, but often do not get, a reasonable level of critical thinking and problem solving skill in applicants:

"Critical thinking –the ability to see more than one view at a time, to remove prejudices... project realistic consequences of actions."

"Drawing practical applications from analysis results."

"Problem-solving skills."

"Ability to ask questions, and (to) take action after gathering information."

"Common sense."

"Reasoning skills."

"Research skills and applying information... print off the Internet but never read it. They then turn it in as 'my information.'"

"Ability to think about a task and find a solution, not just find the problems."

"...have the skill sets I require: critical thinking skills, decision making skills..."

"In my experience I have found that candidates educated through the private schools possess a lot more self-discipline and problem-solving skills overall."

Other critical workplace skills are often missing too, though less frequently mentioned by Main Street's employers. Their list includes: telephone and work etiquette, self-organization and time management skills, reading comprehension and vocabulary skills, following technical directions, research and study skills, bookkeeping and accounting skills, and team-based skills.

The most important technical skill? Employers say, “A good set of personal ethics standards.”

Survey respondents – surprisingly – said that values-development was by far the most important skill, even ahead of communications skills.

- 87% of employers stressed well developed ethical standards such as good character and honesty as essential.
- Communications skills, such as listening and expressing ideas, were rated the next most essential non-technical skill by 74.7% of survey respondents.
- Dealing with others and self-management skills tied for third place in essential skills by 65.5% of survey respondents.

- General adaptability – e.g., creative thinking and problem-solving came closely behind with 55.8% of survey respondents rating it as essential.

A good employee needs a success-oriented education. Parent Driven Schools gives parents the information, tools and resources they need to make sure their children receive an education that prepares them to succeed. Visit our website at ParentDrivenSchools.com.

The most needed skill requirement by importance? “Solid personal values.”

The next question asked respondents their most NEEDED skill requirement by importance. Survey results found “Solid personal values (honesty, dependability, work ethic)” had almost double the number of votes - to the second place requirement, “Ability to read, write and speak English well,” and almost triple the number of votes for the third skill requirement “Reasoning and Critical Thinking.”

The results are surprising considering most educational systems do not attempt to formally teach values – the most important employer need - as a part of their curriculum. Some of the comments made by Main Street’s employers give their ranking more clarity:

“Without personal values, none of the other things matter.”

“Personal character and work ethic are always the most important aspects of an applicant... the foundation upon which all other aspects are built.”

“If we start with good character then everything else falls into place.”

“Without good work ethics, the rest is pointless.”

“As a Publisher, my need for good literate skills is very high, but above that I value personal values which cannot be taught.”

“I don’t like to invest my time and energy to someone that does not have solid personal values.”

“While it is important to have all the basics, it comes down to your values; everything else can be learned...”

“Work ethic is the most important because we have had ELL employees working for us that work harder than any literate English speaking employee we have ever hired.”

Our Parent Driven Schools helpline connects parents to the resources they need: 1-800-979-4436.

Conclusion

There is a sense of total despair among Main Street's employers with regards to today's education system preparing graduates for the working world.

As a final question in the survey, respondents were asked to make any type of closing comment. From these comments, one can get a clear picture of Main Street employers' despair about the education system today. Specifically, what our education system should do about the mentioned gaps in education is a complex topic—properly addressed in length during another paper.

"I feel recruits are not completing their duties if no one is supervising them. I feel like it is difficult for them to take ownership over their responsibilities and it seems they do not want to take on more or complete a task before a deadline."

"... we recruit and hire folks with diverse skills sets. In general, communication and work ethic skills are essential to all positions within our company."

"Our businesses tell us they have problems with new employees taking responsibility just to show up... Applicants often have no common sense to make simple decisions. Retailers complain that applicants don't know how to count change and customer service is lacking... Employee theft is increasing."

"... entry level applicants that are fresh out of high school don't have the work ethic and soft skills needed. I am finding that hiring adults who have retired early meet our office needs. They have a good work ethic, computer skills, soft skills, and are dependable."

"Thank you! One of the biggest issues that comes up during small business round tables is the lack of a trained workforce - sometimes with even minimal skills."

"A basic lack of English fundamentals in the written word, which translates to poor or shoddy work put on display."

"I am challenged by finding people, young in particular, that have a sense of entitlement and don't want to work for what they want. I need to have someone that can write a basic business letter, answer a phone professionally and can see how one task connects to another."

"Our pool lacks common courtesy, good manners and respect for their elders."

"Dependability is our biggest issue."

"We need to teach a solid curriculum instead of teaching kids to pass a test."

"Technology seems to have eclipsed developing basic interpersonal skills used for problem solving; the gap I am pointing out here stems from over reliance on computer based training and less time providing group problem solving."

"I feel public and private education prepared us to join the workforce more a decade or more ago... it seems that those 30 and younger are not prepared in any of the areas mentioned above."

"Communications skills are lacking, including poor grammar both written and spoken."

"I feel like we settle on the remainder of the staff. It seems difficult to find that many people to fill our need. Motivation and a good work ethic seem to be missing more and more."

"I am seeing a huge gap in general business and computer skills over the past 10 years. Equally important is the basic theme of lack of commitment, drive, and ownership to career responsibilities and objectives."

Action Steps – One Educator’s Opinion

We did not get in this mess overnight, and it will take the efforts of all of us, working together, some time to correct it. There are no ‘simple’ answers. Nevertheless, parents can start by not only pushing for change, but creating it. Wasn’t it Ghandi who said “We must first (ourselves) become the Change we want to see”?

What that means is that parents MUST become far more involved in education, as a group, than has been the case to date:

1. Local schools should become ‘parent-driven’ or influenced, to the maximum possible extent.
2. Parents should insist on being consulted on how a child’s school operates, and what its goals, objectives and standards will be.
3. Parents should take an active role in decision-making about what type of school their children will attend.
4. Parents should insist that educators address the unique personality, interests, and learning style of their child.
5. Parents should be involved with educating their students at home – yes, in values, too – and not depend 100% on the school to do the job.

For more details and actions that you can take, visit ParentDrivenSchools.com.

Each year, American businesses lose more and more productivity because graduates are woefully ill-prepared.



Join us as we take back our children's education. Together we can make a difference!

Parent-Driven Schools offers the following FREE resources:

A toll-free Helpline: (800) 979-4436

Our Helpline connects parents and educators to a wealth of parent-approved resources, ideas and help that provides students with the best educational experience possible. Call anytime Monday-Friday during business hours and a Support Specialist will get back to you within 48 hours.

An informative website:

www.parentdrivenschools.com

Our website is filled with information, tools, and resources parents need to make sure their children receive an education that prepares them to succeed.

Read some of our success stories; share your thoughts and questions on our blog and in our forum pages; and sign up for our email newsletter that provides you with the information you need to be in control of your child's education.

And coming in Fall 2009!

Our Soft Skills Assessment Tool (SSAT)

Based on your thoughts and feedback, the SSAT provides your employees an opportunity to go online and complete an assessment to identify areas for improvement in their professional development.

In order to ensure your child is prepared for future employment opportunities, your students can take the SSAT to focus on areas needed for success when they begin their careers.



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