

IN THE DAYS OF "DOT.BOMB," ARE EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR THE SAME THING?
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ABSTRACT

One hundred and forty-eight members of the Western Association of Colleges and Employers were surveyed to determine the importance of specific majors in college and to uncover areas where curriculum should be modified to better serve the needs of the business community. Results showed the needs to be remarkably consistent with earlier studies. Continued requirements of writing and communication skills were confirmed. Employers would like for graduates to gain some seasoning before they pursue an MBA. Several course outline suggestions were taken from the research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequent questions college students ask is "what should I major in," or "do I need math for that job?" Every generation faces the working world differently, and each generation of employers seeks slightly different skill sets. Educators must pay attention to what their students need to succeed in jobs once they graduate. In addition, educational institutions are increasingly competitive and are judged, in part, on the success of their job placement. The purpose of this research is to confirm, with a group of employers, who partner with colleges and universities, what skills and traits are in current demand. Goals included providing evidence of employer need for basic business skills training, providing evidence of the importance of specific business majors, and uncovering, for ourselves, areas to modify the curriculum and activities to better serve the needs of the business community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociology of the employment contract has been altered (Lantos 1999), such that having portable skills is more important today than ever before. Workers today act as free agents in workplaces while in previous generations they were career managers. For instance, Raymond, McNabb, and Matthaei (1993) found that employers ranked oral skills, dependability, interpersonal skills, written skills and self-starter as the top five skills and abilities needed for success. In 1997, Kryder identified written business communications, oral business communication, team orientation, computer competency, and multicultural communication as the five core skills necessary for accounting

graduates (Kryder 1997). However, in 1999, prospective employer respondents answered that the most important attributes are responsibility and accountability, ethical values, interpersonal skills, oral communication, time management and punctuality, the ability to work in teams, and decision making and analytical skills (Risacher 1999). The employers in Risacher's research attached greater importance than the faculty to oral communication, decision making and analytical ability, written communication and creative writing. University faculty members surveyed placed greater importance on ethical values, project management, and persuasive ability. Pool (2001) reported that business schools were too technical and quantitative. Contemporary business students should be developing human relations skills and effective problem-solving skills. Risacher (1999), in reviewing the Oblinger and Verville book What Business Wants from Higher Education, identified the importance of teamwork, creative ability, and developing core competencies and oral communication negotiation. Dietz (1997) found that employers who hire MBA graduates expect more "thinking out of the box" and an ability to deal with ambiguity than they are seeing. A study done in Florida (Techniques 1999) noted that new employees lack the ability to connect their education to the workplace, in terms of flexibility and communication skills.

The importance of communication vs. technical skills continues to receive attention in research. A 1999 study of Fortune 500 executives on the competency requirements of accounting graduates found that, though accounting knowledge is certainly important for accounting graduates, the importance of communication skills and group skills is expected to increase in the future (Błaszczynski 1999).

Communication skills are not limited to business communication. They also include business etiquette and protocol. Lazorchak (2000) reported that more than 40% of business professionals believe that the business etiquette skills of college graduates have lessened over the last decade. Is this due to "casual dress Fridays?" This research did not focus on dress as part of professional etiquette, but there is evidence that businesses are "linking the laid-back look to an overall lack of professionalism and business acumen (White 2001)".

As the authors have liberal arts bachelor's degrees, they were interested in how students fare who choose a liberal arts education. According to The College Majors Handbook: The Actual Jobs, Earnings, and Trends for Graduates of 60 College Majors, graduates with a bachelor's degree in psychology were most likely to find jobs as managers, executives, or administrators (1999). Career World reported that salary increases have been substantial for liberal arts graduates in recent years (1999).

METHODOLOGY

The Western Association of Colleges and Employers (WACE) was selected as the population for the current research. WACE was organized in 1951 to "provide leadership in identifying and responding to economic, political, social and technical forces affecting Career Services and College Relations/Recruitment professionals". They are regarded as a strategic, leading-edge association in the career services and college relations field. There are more than 300 members. We chose the 148 members companies listed under "employer members."

A one-page e-mail survey was developed using Perseus Software to send an email survey to one representative from each company. Forty-six surveys were returned marked as undeliverable via e-mail. E-mail surveys were followed up by a phone call to companies whose email addresses were correct, but who had not responded. Twenty-one completed surveys were collected (14%) and a third follow-up call was made to the remaining viable addresses. Afterward, 40 surveys were re-sent with a follow-up phone call to the WACE member. Some individuals did not want to return the survey because they were too busy or their company had a policy against participating in such research. A total of 30 surveys (20% or 29% of valid names were collected).

Participants and a copy of the survey are available from dietzj@ulv.edu.

RESULTS

The first and second questions asked for names and titles. In most cases, the WACE members are college recruiters or human resource directors. Question 3 surveyed the kinds of jobs the company offers, and was open-ended. Jobs offered include the following:

Field	Percentage
Engineering	31
Engineering/Bus Ad	27
Accounting	14
Sales	10
Computer	7
Finance	3
Other	7

Question 4 provided evidence of the importance of specific majors within the business curriculum. For the sake of brevity, the results of weighting the importance of specific majors yielded the following, in order of importance:

1. Accounting
2. Finance
3. Business Administration
4. Marketing
5. Communications
6. Liberal Arts
7. Computer Science
8. Does not matter.

Question 5 explored the performance and behavior traits desired by the WACE members. Using "1" as less important and "3" as very important. The weighted average yielded the following ranking:

Teamwork	2.84
Desire to succeed	2.83
Enthusiasm	2.72
Attitude	2.71
Attention to Detail	2.7
Ability to take direction	2.48
Loyalty	2.46
Leadership	2.41
Punctuality	2.25

Teamwork and the desire to succeed were the most important, followed by enthusiasm, attitude, and attention to detail. Less important were ability to take direction, loyalty, and leadership. The least important was punctuality.

The fact that loyalty is not at the top concurred with research done in 1996 of Corporations that pays for MBA degrees for their employees. Those employers, even though they might be paying over \$50,000 for the degree, cited "loyalty" as less important than other traits (Dietz 1997).

Question 6 asked for the needs of learned skills, as opposed to those from attitude and the desire to succeed. Teamwork, communication, computer

skills and the ability to work alone were the most important, followed by Internet skills, presentation skills, and word processing. Less than seventy percent checked research and quantitative skills. This list is important for students to understand, because many of them do not see the need for math, spreadsheet and presentation skills. A well-rounded student will fare better. This met Objective #1, to provide the need for basic business training at the college level.

Question 7 was an open-ended question about other skills required. Computer skills, and specifically those dealing with new software, are in demand. Additional skills included C++, JAVA, and flexibility, problem solving, being a self-starter, teamwork and leadership. The answers to this question require that the curriculum at colleges and universities keep up with industry demand, which was Objective #3.

The final question asked employers when an employee should seek a graduate degree. The majority, 41%, said that they should wait more than three years, 31% said that it does not matter, and 28% suggested they wait 1-3 years. None of the respondents felt they should pursue an MBA immediately after graduation. Some commented that it is beneficial to have some work experience.

DISCUSSION

The objectives of the study were to provide evidence of employer need for basic business training, to discover the importance of specific majors within the business curriculum and to discover areas to modify our curriculum and activities to better serve the needs of the business community.

Despite the "dot.com" rage of venture funding that has recently ended, the needs of employers remain remarkably consistent. Employees are seeking employees who can work well in teams, who can write, who can present well, and who are current in the latest computer and Internet skills. And, yet, they also need math skills.

The strong preference for business majors such as accounting, finance and marketing is good evidence to use when talking to students about majors. This was not necessarily an expected outcome, as many of the companies in our population are general companies; nevertheless, business majors are highly desirable.

We did confirm our suspicion that employers would prefer that graduates get some seasoning for a few years before embarking on their MBA. Students should also note that many employers would pay for advanced education. The fact that the desire for students to wait a few years was unanimous will aid in student advising.

What changes can we make in our curriculum from this research? One, we can make use of Internet-based options provided by publishers as ways of broadening the information in our classes. Two, we can review our course outlines to make sure that the outcomes of this research, such as the need for teamwork, are covered.

As can be seen, none of the employers thought that students should pursue their MBA immediately after undergraduate school. It was interesting that 41% felt the graduates should wait more than 3 years. This is a concept that the authors have felt, but wanted to have confirmed.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We intend to continue our research with graduates of programs around the country to confirm their own experiences with the need for skills they may not have mastered. We will also present these results to our own departments for appropriate action.

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