

**RESPONDING TO THE EMPLOYER-APPLICANT SKILLS GAP:
ONE COLLEGE'S RESPONSE TO CLEANING UP
DIGITAL DIRT AND ACTING FINE**

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“Failure to equip young people with the job readiness skills critical to job success is equivalent to placing employability barriers in their path. Allowing students to graduate with these deficiencies has far reaching implications.” (Robinson, pNA)

New skill sets are required for the current workplace. The resounding consensus today is the growing emphasis on soft skills. These soft skills include good communication (Dolash, Cline, Woods, and Johnson), leadership (Woods), “people management” (Woods, Johnson, and Cline), networking (Johnson), adaptability (Dolash), emotional intelligence (Goldberg), teamwork (Cline), and creativity in problem solving (Robinson). The President of Add Staff, Cari Shaffer, has pointed out that “a resume is just an advertisement piece. It is to create an interest and in the interview is where you discuss soft skills.” (Johnson, pNA)

“Cleaning up digital dirt” and “acting fine,” are included under the umbrella of “professionalism”, which encompasses an ever-widening array of skills in demand in the workplace today. Professionalism continues to be a hot topic in the business world – and one that employers expect colleges and universities to address. With all of the important knowledge that needs to be conveyed to students within the academic arena, this aspect of employability often does not get the amount of attention in the classroom that is needed to adequately prepare students and graduates. It needs to extend beyond classroom walls into all other aspects of students’ lives and education.

Soft skills are not just critical for hiring, but for retention as well. (Cline, 2005) To aid in retention efforts, companies today are beefing up their soft-skills training. Goldberg (2005) has suggested that companies can no longer afford to dismiss the importance of soft skills. Instead, he views soft skills training as a critical investment of companies to improve their financial performance by protecting the investment in talented human capital. Van Meter Industrial’s training program includes the administration of the DiSC Profile to assist their employees in improving their ability to understand themselves and others. The result has been better problem solving skills in their workforce.

Technical skills are simply not enough any longer. A 2006 Robert Half survey emphasized the growing importance of soft skills (especially communication and leadership) for employers. Ironically, only 25 percent of the survey respondents thought that technical skills would provide a competitive edge for job applicants. Instead, people management led the list of preferred skills (cited by 50 percent of respondents) followed by communication and leadership skills at 42 and 41 percent respectively. Acknowledging “limited social competencies” and poor communication skills among the top problems for new finance professionals, the need for soft skills training is reinforced. Ian Graves of Robert Half International said, “Historically, people have found themselves in leadership positions simply because of their outstanding technical ability. Today, this is no longer enough....Employers want to find the right mix of technical know-how and social awareness.” (Woods, p. 16)

Why is professionalism so important in business today? As business has evolved, it now finds itself in the “service” era. Service, at first, required competency in one’s profession, such as being an accomplished accountant or chemist. Now it extends beyond just being good at one’s profession to being good at communicating with others, both within the company and, of course, with customers or clients. “Service with a smile” is required to remain competitive in today’s business world, and professionalism on all levels fills that needs gap. In response to this, companies that provide this kind of training have thrived. Troy Waugh has established Rainmaker Academy and Five Star³ LLC, specializing in arming accountants with these important communication skills. Says Waugh, “Clients demand more than financial reports and tax returns, and stay with firms as a result of great service and communication.” (Stimpson, p.24)

Waugh’s point is further reinforced with the posing of two thought provoking questions: “What if we train our employees, and then they leave? The real question we must consider is, “What if we don’t train them and they stay?” (Stimpson, p.24) Consulting firms which offer these types of programs and workshops are increasing in numbers and being kept busy. There is such a need that many firms specialize in a particular field, such as accounting. And some firms are even more field-specific, focusing their efforts on one subset such as auditing.

Particularly in this day and age, with a diverse student population, professionalism is more important than ever. While this paper focuses on the definition of professionalism in American culture, the term has varying definitions in other cultures, and as business becomes increasingly global, familiarity with professionalism specific to other cultures becomes even more critical. For the purpose of this paper, however, the focus is on professionalism as viewed through the perspective of American business. It is noteworthy that it is a hot topic universally, with research revealing articles from other countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

According to Hall, the current generation in the United States that is joining the workforce has grown up with much more structure than the Baby Boomers. They have gone to educational group work from structured play exercises and sports, while Baby Boomers were much more independent. The good news is that the current generation is used to working within teams and with others; the bad news is that if the Baby Boomers don’t pass on their knowledge, skills and best practices, the world of work will end up with employees who lack independent skills, e.g. how to professionally answer the phone, or how to book a boardroom. (Lougheed, p.NA)

While educators have been given credit for providing graduates with the required technical skills, there is concern and disappointment “that applicants lacked a sufficiently broad spectrum of skills, especially employability skills, necessary to efficiently apply and effectively leverage their technical skills.” (BATEC Study, 2006) Employers have been quite vocal in indicating their willingness to remedy a shortcoming in job applicants’ technical skills, but not in employability skills. This, then, places increasing pressure on educational institutions to continue to address these employability skills with renewed vigor.

Employability skills (also referred to as “job readiness” skills) have focused on social skills. They have been defined as “those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job” (Robinson, p.1). These skills are more generic in nature – transcending industries, job vocations, and major fields of study. According to Robinson (2000), they include the following personal qualities: “responsibility, self confidence, self control, social skills, honest, have integrity, adaptable style and flexible, team spirit, punctual and efficient, self directed, good work attitude, well groomed, cooperative, self motivated, and self management” (p.2).

A study was conducted in 2002 at Goldey-Beacom College in Wilmington, Delaware by Germack and Merritt to determine if there was a gap between the skill set employers are seeking and the skill set actually possessed by recent college graduates (both undergraduates and graduates). With 92 employer responses, a major conclusion of the survey was that there was a “lack of polish” and a concern with the “basics of decorum” on the part of employers in regards to undergraduate candidates. This survey was a great starting point to determine what skill gaps need to be filled for students by colleges and universities. It is only the beginning, however. To be effective, active and continuous solicitation of input from employers will be needed. There are many ways that colleges and universities can receive input, from questionnaires to advisory boards to workshops such as the one detailed below. From this gathering of information, a list of dos and don’ts can be compiled for students, as well as valuable updates and insight into employers’ screening processes. As the business world continues to change and evolve, so will the recommendations.

“Acting fine,” or professionalism, has been a recurring theme from workforce employers across all industries and firms of all sizes. A report entitled “Are They Really Ready to Work?” cited “professionalism/work ethic” among the top of the list of those skills identified by employers as the most important in today’s workforce. The frustration mounts, however, as college graduates continue to fall painfully short in their preparedness in this area.

“The study’s findings are valuable to new (and future) workforce entrants as well as to business people, educators, policy makers, and members of community organizations – anyone who has an interest in ensuring the success of new entrants into the U.S. workforce. The preparedness and skill levels of its workforce are critical factors in the ability of the United States to stay competitive in the 21st century.” (Casner-Lotto, p.12)

“Professionalism” included such areas as work ethic, proper dress, an ability to communicate, punctuality, a grasp of the basics of the application process itself, accountability, and an understanding of how business operates in general (including basic expectations).

According to Cline (2005), “nine out of 10 times, companies will go with the candidate with more personality....The hard skills are important, but these soft skills are going to get them in the door.” (pNA) As educators, there is a responsibility to address student preparedness – both in and outside the classroom. Goldey-Beacom College heeded the advice given in the report that educators should consider “incorporating more hands-on and practical experience for students in the curricula and seek ways to involve community organizations and businesses to pilot workforce-applicable learning opportunities”. (Casner-Lotto, p.59)

Digital Dirt

Students must be adequately prepared to avoid potential pitfalls. One relatively new pitfall for many students seeking employment is “digital dirt,” and it is important that they be educated on this topic. Employers have access to job applicants’ personal lives as never before in this technological era. Social networking websites like FaceBook and MySpace provide additional insights for perspective employers to learn more about their job applicants. The recently coined phrase, “digital dirt,” refers to the less than favorable information that many employers may find on prospective employees while conducting a search in cyberspace. Employers are using the information that they find online to make decisions about job candidates. If anything questionable is uncovered, employers don’t hesitate to eliminate a job candidate from consideration. “In a recent survey of 100 executive recruiters, 35% said they dropped a job candidate because of information uncovered online.” Additionally, “77% of respondents said

they use search engines to learn more about prospective employees.” (“Digital Dirt Derailing Job Seekers; Careful how you pad those resumes”, p.NA)

Anyone seeking a job is urged to conduct a self-search online on a regular basis. Being proactive in this regard can prevent a candidate from becoming a casualty of an employer’s screening process. It will give the candidate an opportunity to rectify anything online that is negative or incriminating, as well as providing a chance to improve an online image through adding positive personal information. (“Digital Dirt Derailing Job Seekers; Careful how you pad those resumes”) Searches can include email addresses as well as names, and some recruiters have extended searches to include reading job applicants’ blogs online. The use of technology to research job candidates continues to expand, and will probably continue to do so for years to come.

With many college students heavily utilizing social networking sites, they inadvertently provide personal information to future employers. Discussing digital dirt in the classroom in courses such as ethics, human resource management, organizational behavior, technology, and business communication can better prepare students. Assignments highlighting new hiring approaches can also provide additional insight for students.

How to Wine, Dine, and Act Fine

Heeding advice for all stakeholders to partner together to educate the upcoming workforce, the Goldey-Beacom College Career Services Department and the student chapter of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) partnered with the student SHRM chapter of another local college and the Delaware professional chapter of SHRM to sponsor a workshop entitled “*How to Wine, Dine, and Act Fine*”. This workshop was a 2½ hour program presented in three modules with voluntary student attendance. All of the presenters were members of the local professional chapter of SHRM and local employers (thereby building additional stakeholder relationships).

The first module addressed basic communication skills (including how to create the 15-second elevator speech), interviewing skills (including an interactive practice session shaking hands), and the importance of cleaning up their digital dirt. Students were reminded that the majority of businesses today conduct an Internet search (often referred to as “cybersleuthing”) of job applicants. These searches can range from sophisticated paid searches by outside firms specializing in these background investigations to some as basic as a *google* search. Recommendations for voice mail, e-mail addresses (such as dropping “hottie19@aol.com) and Facebook or MySpace entries were provided. An overview of the interviewing process itself was presented.

In the second module, dining was addressed. With more group interviews in a social setting and more interviews conducted over meals, basic etiquette tips were presented. Some reminders included keeping the right hand free to shake hands, remembering that the food does not represent the last supper, and avoiding that powdered donut while sporting a navy blue interviewing suit.

In the third module, appropriate interview attire was discussed. This had been approached as a “do” and “don’t” fashion show one year. The key point communicated was reminding students that they must dress the part to get the part.

This program has provided a win-win as local employers are able to present their workforce expectations (and pet peeves) while students are able to improve their professional preparedness for the workplace. This has enabled the college to keep the lines of communication open to

regularly assess changing expectations of local employers and identify how they believe the college can better prepare graduates.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The success of the U.S. economy will depend upon the nation's ability to produce the most well-rounded employees. This point was illustrated beautifully in a response to the findings of a 2005 Skills Gap Report survey in the manufacturing arena. John Engler (2007) succinctly stated, "The U.S. is never going to compete in the global marketplace on the basis of low wages. Our competitive edge instead must come from talent, innovations, smarts and skills. All these attributes begin with education." (p.44) Business and industry are crying out for help with the development of soft skills and higher education must partner with them to begin the process of providing a fundamental background of these skills to students.

This is corroborated by the findings of the Boston Area Advanced Technological Education Connections (BATEC) Information Technology Workforce Skills Study. Employers participating in the study confirmed that applicants lacked the following essential skills: communication skills (verbal aptitude), program solving skills (especially problem definition), greater facility with teamwork and collaboration, ability to manage and motivate one's self, and contextual knowledge of the work – not just the "how" but the "why" and "whom" and "when". (BATEC Information Technology Workforce Skills Study, p.5) This is consistent with Goldey-Beacom College's findings in their surveys of employers over the years. While, like many institutions, Goldey-Beacom College is doing a fine job with the technical aspects of student preparation, the areas of increasing concern are the soft skills. The BATEC study findings also echo the sentiment expressed by John Engler. To compete, American IT professionals will need to add value to intellectual capital and must possess the ability to leverage employability skills or they will lose the employment race to IT professionals from other countries.

A recommendation to higher education on how to impart employability skills without adversely affecting the time to degree or reducing technical skills focused on improved and more efficient methods of teaching and learning. More holistic methods of teaching that are interactive were suggested; perhaps partnering with business and industry to participate in the instructional process rather than just soliciting their input for content could be more effective for educators. Actually engaging students with potential employers in some activities can be helpful. (BATEC Information Technology Workforce Skills Study) Realistically, the degree to which this can be done may need to be carefully monitored. A balance of the total skills set must always be at the forefront of the educator's mind. However, going beyond advisory board input to actual interaction with employers should be a win/win/win situation for students, employers, and educators alike. At Goldey-Beacom College, employers participate in mock interviews, resume reviews, and various workshops, as well as guest lecturing on occasion. Internships are strongly encouraged for students as well. Continuation and expansion of such activities at institutions of higher learning must be strongly encouraged and actively pursued.

This problem of preparing the workforce for successful employment is not just one for educators, however. That is both the good news and the bad news. The bad news is that, because it is not self-contained, educators cannot "fix" the problem alone, and they do not have complete control. Educators must depend on other constituencies to assist in this charge. Industry, media, government, families, and society in general, are required to teach and reinforce these all-important soft skills. (Stephens and Scott) The good news here is that all are equal stakeholders in this process.

This workshop is proposed as an idea-sharing forum to facilitate an open discussion of what educational institutions are doing – both in and outside the classroom to better prepare graduates for the 21st century workforce. It might be noted that this workshop is a direct response to the recommendation for roundtable discussions among educators presented in the report “Are They Really Ready to Work?”

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