

Arkansas Department of Education

Business Leader Research

on

Preparedness of High School Seniors

for Entering the Workforce

May 2006

Background

In May of 2006, two focus groups were conducted for the Arkansas Department of Education. The goal of this research was to explore the needs of Arkansas business leaders with regards to hiring Arkansas high school graduates. Some of the themes explored in the research were: skills perceived to be lacking in the graduates, strong suits of recent high school graduates, current workforce needs, and overall perceptions of recent high school graduates.

Methodology

Two focus groups were conducted. The first group of 10 participants was conducted in Little Rock, and the second group of 12 participants was conducted in El Dorado. Participants were human resource and business leaders from the respective communities. Participants came from both large and small businesses, as well as privately owned and government organizations. Additionally, a few participants were engaged in educational efforts and/or workforce development.

Participants were instructed to complete a survey provided by the Arkansas Department of Education. After survey completion, participants were guided in a focus group conducted by a moderator.

Results

Overview

The skills that employers are looking for can be broken down into two categories: hard skills and soft skills. For the purpose of this research, hard skills are defined as specific skills sets useful for specific job types. In this report the hard skills discussed are: writing, math, science, computer skills and reading comprehension. Soft skills are defined as everyday life/social skills and will include work ethic, verbal and nonverbal communication, attendance, interview abilities and attitude, amongst others.

The complaints of the business leaders were dominated by soft skills. Though employers touched on certain hard skills that could be improved, the majority of their complaints revolved around soft skills. As one employer said, “We want somebody who shows up on time, somebody who works hard and someone who’s trainable.”

Participants Job Titles/Business Types

More than 85% of the participants were directly involved in handling hiring and personnel decisions at the workplace. The various participant positions/job titles represented at the focus group included: Chief Operating Officer, Coordinator of Services, Director of HR, Director of Workforce Development, HR Manager, Personnel

Manager, Human Resources Manager, Programs Coordinator, Senior VP / Director of Community Development, Staffing Manager, Vice President and others.

Perception of High School Graduate Preparedness

- 55.5% of respondents stated that recent American public high school graduates with no further education or formal training are either “not too well prepared” or “not [well prepared at all](#)” to enter the [workforce](#).
- 66.7% of respondents stated that recent American public high school graduates with no formal education or formal training are either “not too well prepared” or “not well prepared at all” to advance within their company.
- 47.4% of respondents stated that they are somewhat dissatisfied with the job that American public high schools are doing in preparing their graduates for work.

Hard Skills

Hard Skills: Writing

76.3% of respondents stated that less than half of the recent high school graduates who apply for jobs in their company have quality writing skills.

The ability to express one’s self on paper came up time and time again in the focus groups. Many of the focus group participants expressed dissatisfaction with recent high school applicants’ ability to express thoughts and communicate in written form. In fact, 10 out of the 10 Little Rock focus group participants agreed that the ability to read and write is a major problem with recent high school graduates. Some of the verbatim comments regarding concern for recent high school graduates' abilities to write include:

- “[There are problems with graduates] being able to express themselves on paper. Like if they had a workers’ comp claim and had to write down what happened to them.”
- “[They lack] just basic writing skills.”
- “I guess the biggest factor I can see in preventing me from keeping these kids is they just can’t flat [read and write](#).”
- “On the data entry-level ... our entry level positions are customer-service oriented, so they [graduates] actually have to log the conversation ... some it’s amazing the grammatical errors ... it’s almost [scary](#).”
- “Some of the more consistent deficiencies I’ve noted have to do with the general ability to communicate thoughts in writing.”

Hard Skills: Math

76.3% of respondents stated that less than half of the recent high school graduates who apply for jobs in their company have the ability to do math.

Particularly with those employers coming from industry and the technology sector, the employers sought stronger math skills. In particular, many of the participants suggested that graduates need more skills in applying math to real world situations.

Some of the verbatim comments include:

- “Look at my workforce in general. The majority of my workforce are hourly and fall within operations, maintenance and laboratory ... [the skills needed] are algebra, chemistry, science and math.”
- “Math skills, the kids need to learn how to apply that [math skills] in real life situations.”
- “[They lack] basic math skills.”
- “Conversions from fractions to decimals... that kind of thing.”

- “On a workforce side, you’re going to have to [know] your basic mathematics.”

Hard Skills: Science

47.3% of respondents stated that they were somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with recent high school graduates science skills.

Science skills did not come up as frequently as reading, writing and math. Though many employers acknowledged its importance, they also noted that many of the applicable science skills could be taught on the job. Those employers who focused more on the importance of science skills were those coming from technology sectors. For example, a HR manager from a chemical company stated, “[entry level employees] need to know the theory of chemistry. They need to know why they are mixing this to get this.”

Hard Skills: Reading Comprehension

63.2% of respondents stated that they are either somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with recent high school graduate’s preparedness in the area of reading and understanding complicated materials.

Reading comprehension came up in the focus group as an important skill that is perceived inadequate in many of the recent high school graduates. Though this was mentioned as an important skill, it did take somewhat of a back seat to writing skills. Several of the respondents cited concerns that graduates are not able to comprehend necessary written documents including: technical manuals and codes of conduct. One employer noted, “All of our tech manuals are now written for the 11th grade and higher. If you can’t read and comprehend, you are going to struggle advancing ...if you can’t read it and understand ... you are limiting your career.”

Hard Skills: Computer Literacy

79% of participants stated that they are either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with recent high school graduates' preparedness in the area of computer skills.

All of the participants were undeniably pleased with recent high school graduates' level of computer literacy. Many of the participants expressed that the recent graduates' computer skills often exceeded their older colleagues. Some verbatim comments include:

- “These kids coming out of high school, they know computers.”
- “We have seen kids coming in, young people coming in, they’re not afraid of the keyboard ... they can excel because they are already comfortable with doing that [keyboarding].”

Additional Hard Skills/Themes

In addition to the above areas, the participants suggested the following hard skills or themes as potential areas of improvement for high school education:

- **Tuition Reimbursement:** Many employers expressed dismay at entry-level employees not taking advantage of substantial tuition reimbursement plans. Employers see these plans as ways to better their own workforce, as well as ways to better the individual. One employer stated, “They [entry level employees] have an opportunity, financially, to get assistance they need to go wherever they want, but it’s the ones who have already experienced it [higher education] that take more advantage of it than people who first come in ... I think it’s a problem.”
- **Listening and Communication Skills:** 79.9% of survey respondents stated that they were either somewhat or very dissatisfied with students’ preparedness in the area of oral communications and public speaking.
- **Development of Mechanical Aptitude**

- **Problem Solving/Analytical Thinking:** 63.6% of the survey respondents stated that they are somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with high school graduates' ability to think analytically.
- **Emerging Technology**

Soft Skills

In both focus groups, the complaints and concerns were dominated by soft skills. Many participants expressed extreme frustration with entry-level employees' lack of soft skills. Additionally, many participants expressed the willingness to train employees in whatever hard skills necessary, if only the graduates would exhibit most of the soft skills listed below. For example, when participants were asked, "Which is more often the cause when a recent high school graduate is struggling with work?" 57% of participants responded that the employee, "lacks motivation/has distractions/not applying themselves," in comparison to only 10.5% who responded that the graduate, "lacks skills/was not adequately prepared." This theme of poor soft skills, elucidated in the responses to the above question, essentially set the tone for the focus group discussion.

Soft Skills: Attendance

Attendance was the number one soft skill brought up in the focus groups. Participants expressed great frustration with getting employees to show up to work on time or to even show up to work at all. Some verbatim comments reflection this frustration include:

- "They can't get to work on time, they won't pick up the phone and call their supervisor ... I would say that 95% of the people who either terminate themselves or get terminated, it's because of attendance."
- "They need to impress me with ... punctuality."

- “[There are problems with] showing up to work on time or just flat out showing up for work.”
- “Attendance is a huge issue that we tend to face hiring at that [entry] level.”
- “[I want] to get an indication of their punctuality.”
- “I think a lot of the issues we are dealing with ... [involve] showing up on time.”
- “We want somebody who shows up on time, somebody who works hard, someone who’s trainable.”
- “They’ve [entry level employees] got a real thing about not showing up.”
- “The attendance policy is something that is abused quite often at this level of individual.”

Soft Skills: Decorum/Demeanor/Personal Presentation

Many of the participants were baffled at the behavior and lack of professionalism in entry-level employees (including but not excluded to appropriate workplace behavior and interview techniques). This was a frequent theme in the focus groups. Some verbatim comments include:

- “The biggest problem that we [employers] see ... we shouldn’t be teaching attitude. And when we see a lot of young people coming in, we just try to teach them to be nice. And you know, that’s a challenge.”
- “Speaking skills just aren’t there. They don’t know how to present themselves professionally in speech or dress. And that’s a big problem for us now.”
- “I’ve talked to so many of my managers; and they feel like they are parents, parenting kids, trying to reprimand them, discipline them. If you are a supervisor, you spend a lot of time doing that, instead of teaching them their job or helping them advance their skills.”
- “Typically what they lack is just really lack of professional demeanor and understanding of how to present themselves, how to interview, how to write resumes.”

- “Let’s have a whole semester in, ‘This is How You’re Going to Act at Work; You’re Going to Act This Way at School.’”
- “Start teaching these kids some life skills ... figure out ways to implement life skills so they’ll know how to act around adults.”
- “People who come in for a job interview, and they will be wearing jeans, shirts with their midriff showing, wearing flip flops. They will bring their friends on interview with them.”

Soft Skills: Work Ethic/Habits

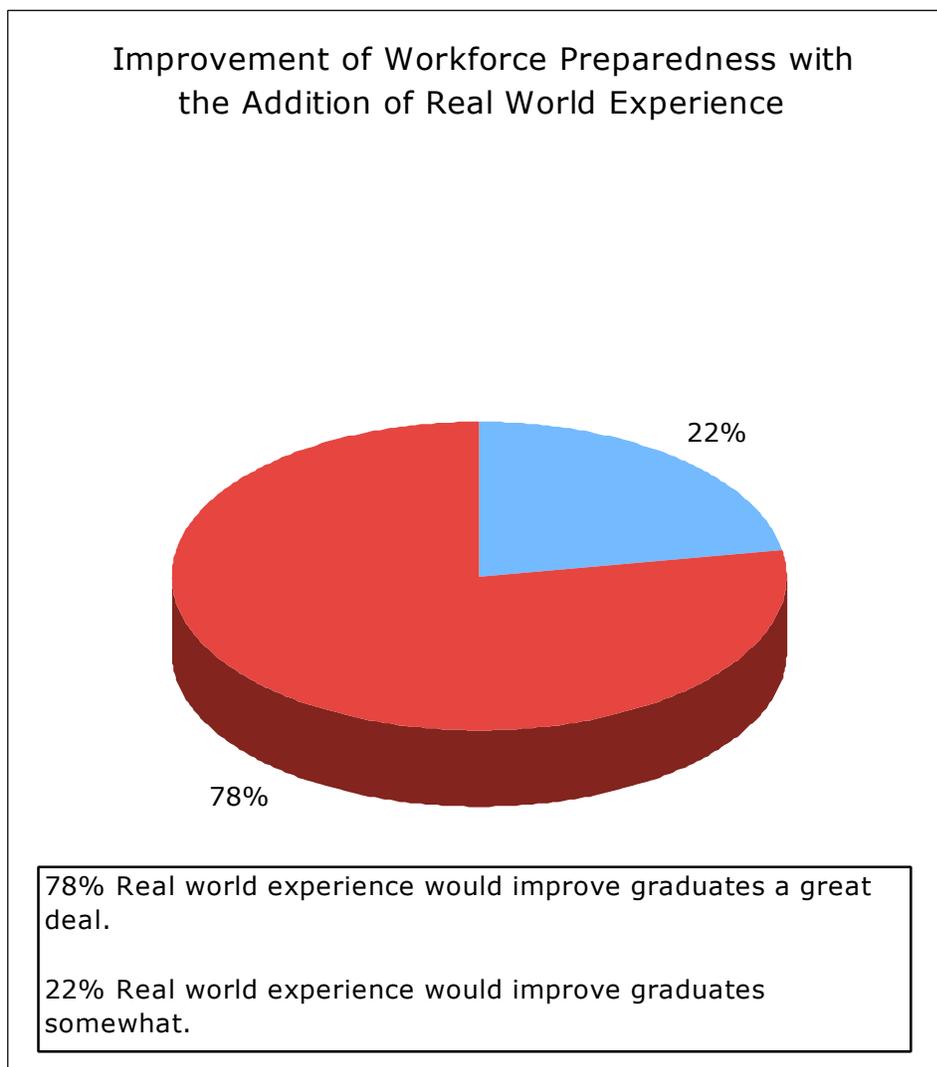
- *78% of respondents stated that they are either somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the job that high schools are doing in preparing students in the area of work habits.”*
- *76.4% of respondents stated that less than half of the recent high school graduates who apply for jobs in their company have good work habits.*

Work ethic was also an extremely common theme at both of the focus groups. Some verbatim comments include:

- “A lot of the problems we have focus on general work ethic ... staying focused and staying on task.”
- “They don’t come motivated. They want you to hand it to them on a silver platter and not ask them to do a heck of a lot for it.”
- “Maybe there is some basic high school business ethics that you could teach at the high school level.”
- “There are unreal expectations about what you are going to earn in salary.”
- “These kids just don’t know what it’s like to work, to be successful at work. They just don’t have a clue.”
- “If you [entry level employees] have that work ethic, you have that basic skill, if you are trainable, I can do something with you. I want you.”

Real World Experience

When asked if providing real world experiences, such as internships and service learning, would encourage students to work harder and be better prepared for life after high school, 100% of the respondents stated that this would greatly improve or somewhat improve students' workforce performance.



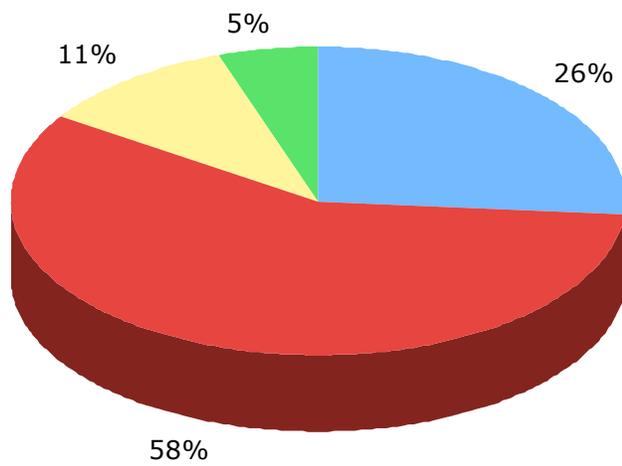
Conclusions:

Though the participants expressed a good deal of frustration at the lack of soft skills in entry-level employees, they expressed even more frustration at the difficulty of trying to teach these skills in a school environment. As one participant put it, “this is home training.” Many other participants expressed the opinion that the problems with recent high school graduates are not skills that could even be taught in school.

However, one solution offered by many of the participants is early exposure to the work environment. Many thought that mentoring or engaging young people in the professional world helps to teach some of these soft skills. In fact, 100% of respondents stated that providing opportunities for more real-world learning, through internships or other opportunities would improve entry-level employees.

Additionally, these real-world experiences may promote growth in the area of some of the hard skills. Participants suggested that reading comprehension, applied math and listening and communication skills could all be improved by the early exposure to the work environment.

Causes of Workforce Struggles Reported as Opinions from Participants



11% More often lacks skills/was not adequately prepared
58% More often lacks motivation/has distractions/not applying
26% Both equally
5% Not sure