THE FIVE MOST IMPORTANT ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS THAT EMPLOYERS OF THE CHIPPEWA VALLEY SEEK IN ENTRY-LEVEL JOB APPLICANTS

by

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to determine the five most important entry-level

employability skills as ranked by a sampling of potential employers in the

Chippewa Valley. The subjects of this study consisted of the personnel directors

of potential Chippewa Valley employers who completed a survey in which they

selected and ranked the five most important entry-level employability attributes

deemed essential in an entry-level job applicant. The employability attributes

listed on the survey consisted of six academic skills, one social skill and three

personality traits. The selection of the ten skills/traits was a result of research

related to entry-level employability attributes. The results determined that the

personality traits pertaining to responsibility and listening behaviors took

precedence over academic proficiencies. The study also indicated that the

respondents believed that approximately one-half to two-thirds of the entry-level

applicants in the Chippewa Valley possess the skills deemed most essential.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the face of economic globalization, our success will depend

not on our ability to out-produce our competitors; rather it will

depend on our ability to harness the power of technology and

deliver top quality products and services to our valued customers

on time, requiring a highly skilled workforce to do the job.

Unfortunately, barely half of all new employees entering the

workforce possess these critical skills, imperiling our vibrant

economy and the prosperity we enjoy. This existing "skills gap"

must be closed if we are to remain the number one economic

power in the world.

> Roger G. Ackerman
> CEO Corning Incorporated
> (NSSB, 2000, p. 3)

Today's labor market has changed dramatically over the course of the past several decades. Little more than a generation ago, virtually any American high school graduate, regardless of their academic and/or social deficiencies, could secure employment somewhere in the production economy which supplied the American consumer with a myriad of goods. Production jobs flourished in which high school graduates could be easily trained on assembly lines which, more often than not, did not require advanced academic or social competencies. There was little, if any, social interaction between these workers and the

customer and, thus, social skills needed by these factory workers centered upon little more than the ability to work in conjunction with co-workers and follow simple basic instructions handed down by management. Advanced academic proficiency was not necessarily essential either for these production line employees. Virtually any assembly line employee could survive in the workplace with basic reading skills that required, at most, the completion of production forms and the following of written directions. In regard to mathematical skills, most employees needed to be proficient only in the most basic of calculations such as weights and measures and additions and subtractions which often could be taught to the graduate with relative ease in on-the-job training. Thus, in this workplace of a past generation, high schools not only met but typically surpassed the employability skills needed by that generation of high school graduates. Virtually every graduate who wanted to enter the workforce possessed the basic skills needed to successfully secure immediate employment in the workplace. In this regard, one could successfully defend the premise that America's high schools were accomplishing their objective – preparing our high school graduates with the employability skills required for immediate entry into the workforce.

Today, however, that premise may not be so easily defended. During the past generation, the American workplace has changed dramatically. The stereotypical assembly line/factory production employment opportunities that required little social or academic proficiency are rapidly diminishing as America is shifting from a 'production driven' economy to a 'service driven' economy. This

shift now requires that prospective entry-level employees be more adept than those of prior generations in regard to the academic and social skills that the 'new' workplace demands. Whereas in the past when workers were often isolated from the customer, more and more jobs today require considerable social interaction with the customer mandating social competency as a basic qualification for employment. Further, with the expanding development of technology comes the requirement that potential employees possess at least the most basic of technology skills such as keyboarding and computer literacy. These two emphases – social competency in servicing customers and technological proficiency – are evident in the quote from Roger G. Ackerman of Corning Incorporated that prefaces this thesis. In stating that the success of an entrepreneurial venture today requires the "ability to harness the power of technology" and "deliver…services to our valued customers", Ackerman is de-emphasizing the 'old' production aspect of capitalism and stressing the 'new' service aspect of a technologically advanced global economy. Of greater pertinence to us in the educational community, however, is his related concern regarding the competency of today's "new employees entering the work force" who do not possess the "critical skills" that today's employers deem necessary. (NSSB, 2000, p. 3)

In effect, Ackerman is stating that he - as a potential employer – does not feel that the institutions designed to prepare today's workforce for employability in today's workplace are performing effectively. Other potential employers mirror Ackerman's beliefs. In a 1999 American Management Association survey,

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almost two out of every five job applicants who were tested for 'basic skills' - defined as "functional workplace literacy…the ability to read instructions, write reports, and do arithmetic at an adequate level" - were categorized as "deficient" (AMA, 2000). Further, in research conducted by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), "more than half our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job" (SCANS 1992, p. xv). Thus, it is obvious that many, if not most, potential employers do not feel that our educational systems are adequately preparing our entry-level graduates with skills commensurate with immediate successful employment.

Statement of the Problem

This leads to a key question which must be asked of today's potential employers: Exactly which employability skills are deemed essential in today's local workplace for an entry-level candidate? Though it is clear that many employers do not feel that many of their entry-level applicants are academically or socially prepared for the world of work, it is difficult to determine specifically which deficiencies exist. Only through obtaining specific needs as expressed by potential employers may our students gain insight to the academic and/or social prerequisites necessary for immediate employment in the local workforce and may our schools analyze their curricular offerings to make certain that these prerequisites are being taught. Armed with this information, our students, our students' parents, and our educational systems may keep abreast of the

transitions that are occurring in today's workplace and produce a quality graduate ready for the world of work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which personal and academic prerequisites prospective employers in the Chippewa Valley consider essential in an entry-level job applicant as measured by a survey conducted among these employers.

Objectives

1) To determine the five most important entry-level skills that employers in the Chippewa Valley seek in an entry-level job applicant.

2) To determine the rank order of importance of these five most important entry-level skills.

3) To determine which entry-level skills employers of the Chippewa Valley believe our local graduates possess/do not possess.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

In order to determine which employability traits need to be included in the

survey that will be distributed to the sampling of employers in the Chippewa

Valley, a review of related literature is necessary. This review will accomplish

two objectives: First, it will provide a rationale for this project by establishing the

perceived need among employers that today's entry-level employees do, indeed,

lack many of the skills necessary for workplace success and, second, it will

enable this project to specifically establish a list, which will be the basis for the

aforementioned survey, of entry-level employability attributes that are considered

essential by employers.

The Rationale

The assembly line jobs that once required only hand-eye coordination

are headed the way of the dinosaurs. The same jobs now require the

the ability to read complex manuals, analyze data, organize information,

and make judgements. For example, in 1965, a car mechanic needed to

understand 5000 pages of service manuals to fix any automobile on the

road. Today, with the advent of high-tech electronics, the same mechanic

must be able to decipher 465,000 pages of technical text – the equivalent

of 250 big-city phone books.

> -Then Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole
> (Hull & Parnell, 1991; p. 69)

There is little doubt that today's employers and educational institutions face a very difficult challenge: How, in an ever-changing workplace, can we adequately prepare future employees for an employment environment that requires a myriad of advanced skills? In a workplace where computer literacy, customer interaction, decision-making and technological know-how have become the norm, potential employees no longer have the luxury of being uneducated, unskilled or unprepared. Yet, on an annual basis, our nation's high schools produce millions of entry-level job candidates that are, in effect, unemployable in today's workplace. Gray & Herr (1995) argued that it is not necessarily the graduates who are to blame for this predicament. Rather, they argued that many of these youths are simply "unengaged in the high school curriculum" (p. 64) and eventually come to "feel about high school the way second- and third-string athletes feel about filling out the roster. Technically, they are part of the team and must show up for practice, but their real involvement is minimal or subservient." (p. 108). Yet, it is these youths who, perhaps more than any other, need a high school curriculum that will engage them in job skills development. Whereas those in the academic elite – the starters on the team – will likely have other opportunities in post-secondary education to develop and refine their employability skills, Hull & Parnell maintained that:

educators…must be reminded that the majority of the population

will never earn a collegiate-level degree. What can high schools

offer them? Is the educational crisis of the year 2000 being

created…by continuing to insist there be only one kind of educational

program applicable to all students? In the medical world, any

physician recommending the same medicine or pill for an illness

would be sued for malpractice. (p. 7-8)

This "neglected majority" (p. vii) should be the target of school-to-work

initiatives in that it is this group of students who will not, in all probability, continue

post-secondary educational opportunities and will directly enter into the

workforce.

Gardner, et. al., (1983) reiterated the argument that more and more young

people are emerging from high school unprepared for the workplace and believes

that "this predicament will become more acute as the knowledge base" for

employment "continues its rapid expansion and new jobs demand greater

sophistication and preparation." (p. 8). Bottoms, Presson & Johnson (1992)

agreed stating that for skill deficient graduates "high school represents their best

chance to prepare for work" (p. 1) and that these graduates "need high-level

academic skills the day after graduation, not four years later. Unlike students

who plan to go directly to a…college or university, these students do not have the

luxury to wait before putting their knowledge to work on the job." (p. 131)

Obviously, this problem is most evident in the workplace itself. As often as

not, entry-level employees are as aware of their work-related deficiencies as are

their employers. Perhaps this is one reason why so many entry-level employees

find themselves floating from one job to the next unable to establish an

employment opportunity in which they feel as if they belong (Schlechty, 1990; p.

8). Many are frustrated that the transition from school to work has been as

difficult as it has been and are equally "frustrated because their high schools talked of English and geometry, but the workplace speaks a different language" (SCANS, 1992; p. xviii). What has been lacking in our high schools, according to Hull & Parnell (1991), "is practical, down-to-earth advice on how to improve student learning for that great group of ordinary students called the neglected majority" who directly, upon graduation, expect to be viable employability candidates in today's workforce. Unfortunately, according to employer assessments, this group is universally lacking in the "higher, more comprehensive skills necessary for the workplace" and "in an information-rich but application-poor society" these candidates may have difficulty succeeding (p. vii).

Gray & Herr (1995) supported the claim that today's primary and secondary educational systems do not focus enough upon Hull & Parnell's "neglected majority". Believing that these students are "not receiving their fair share of high school educational resources", they argue that these student's "successes and failures are just as important to the larger society, to the community, and to their families as are those of the academically blessed, and their preparation for the future should be just as important to their high schools as well" (p. 178). Though they wished they had worked harder in their elementary and high school years and had thought more about their futures, these students reported after graduation that they never felt "pressed to do well" in school and were not given sufficient "opportunities to explore careers while in high school" that could have made a difference in regard to future job preparation (p. 64).

Of course, these aforementioned problems eventually surface in the workplace where employers are faced with a flood of entry-level job applicants who are simply unprepared for entry-level employment. Lacking in computer competency, technological awareness, interpersonal communications skills and "just getting along with other workers at all levels", these entry-level employees cannot effectively make the transition from the classroom to the workroom (Hull & Parnell, 1991). Despite efforts by numerous commissions (See the SCANS report of 1992), federal laws (See the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994), and various school-to-work initiatives launched by virtually every school district in the nation, the problem of preparing our nation's high school graduates for immediate employment in today's workforce remains a pressing issue.

The Employer Consensus

Perhaps the primary challenge that high schools face in preparing our youth for the workplace is the fact that the term 'employability' is difficult to define. Today's workplace is very diverse and the employability skills deemed essential by one employer may not be sufficient for another. A service business, for example, may emphasize interpersonal communications skills as a vital prerequisite for employment. On the other hand, a production business may consider an employee's ability to do technological troubleshooting as far more important. Thus, our schools are caught in somewhat of a dilemma. In an era when we are stressing academic proficiency in the form of graduation tests, how can our schools meet not only that requirement but also the diverse requirements essential for what has become a very diverse workplace? The literature review

reveals this dilemma in that virtually every article comes from a different perspective as to which employability skills are deemed essential by employers today.

Though many assume that the potential employability of a job applicant today focuses primarily upon that applicant's academic capabilities, surprisingly academics does not always take precedence over other non-academic capabilities when it comes to employability. Though virtually every prospective employer considers a job applicant's academic proficiency of value (Bottoms, Presson & Johnson, 1992; Schug & Western, 1999; et. al.), Asher (1988) found that some employers place more emphasis on non-academic skills such as enthusiasm, co-operativeness, discipline and dependability than upon academic proficiency (p. 8). Cotton (1993) reported that many of the employers she surveyed would prefer that our k-12 institutions take a step beyond basic academics and incorporate the teaching of higher-level affective skills in their curricula (p. 88). However, Schug & Western (1999) of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute defended our schools' emphasis on academic preparedness in stating that "schools have never solved the problem of what to do…by turning away from academic goals" (p. 2). Hull & Parnell (1991) believed that it is essential that our schools maintain a balance in regard to academic and non-academic emphases arguing that we can "no longer…speak of the liberal arts versus the practical arts as though we live and learn in separate worlds. The students of the future will need both" in order to survive in the workplace (p. 14).

Thus, it is extremely difficult to establish a consensus as to which specific

employability skills are universally considered the most essential by today's

employers. However, in reviewing surveys conducted by others as well as

business and government-based studies, a general list can be constructed that

will narrow the specifics to a manageable number. And these numbers can

become unmanageable if one permits. For example, Poole (1985) identified 76

"critical employability skills" listed within nine categories and those skills focused

solely upon one attribute – human relations (p. 9-10). However, other

researchers tend to narrow their lists to a more manageable number and

generally group employability skills into three or four separate categories.

Schwartz (1998) categorizes her list of "job readiness skills" under three

headings: 1) Academic Skills; which focus upon an employee's ability to learn

quickly and willingly; to have a knowledge of standard English for speaking,

writing and understanding; and to have the ability to do basic calculations, use

numerical formulas and charts, and estimate quantities. 2) Vocational Skills;

which focus upon the ability to solve problems; to communicate clear instructions

and explanations and to understand what supervisors want from them; and to

have the ability to be able to do manual tasks, to construct and assemble

materials, and use job-related equipment. 3) Work-Related Habits and Attitudes;

to have a general understanding of the workplace and the world of business; to

be dependable and punctual; to be willing to ask questions and accept

correction; to be trustworthy and honest; to have a respectful and positive

attitude; to be patient and cooperative in working on projects until completion;

and to be appropriate in regard to appearance, hygiene and dress (p. 1-2). Hill &
Petty (1995) focused solely upon the "occupational work ethic" in their study and
determined that the employers they surveyed considered an employee's
interpersonal skills, personal initiative and dependability paramount in regard to
workplace readiness. Carson, Huelskamp & Woodall (1993) narrowed their list
significantly in reviewing studies by the Michigan Education Department and the
Rochester New York School District in finding that employers are looking
primarily for four basic attributes: punctuality, respect for others, the ability to
follow directions, and honesty. Surprisingly, they discovered that these studies
further revealed that basic academic skills were considered among the least
important of employability skills (8).

Theil (1985), however, disputed that employers do not consider basic
academic skills of significance. In her study of a 1982 Center for Public
Resources survey, employers in that survey stated that the low literacy rate of
entry-level employees was evident in that 30% of the secretarial staff could not
read effectively, 50% of the managerial and supervisory staff could not write a
paragraph free of mechanical error, and 50 % of the skilled and unskilled
employees could not solve basic math problems using decimals and fractions (4).
Bottom, Presson & Johnson (1992) reinforced the argument that academics are
of importance to employers. In their study, these researchers contend that
employers tend to seek entry-level employees "who can read a technical manual,
write a report, communicate effectively with supervisors and coworkers and make
wise decisions" (p.199). Hull & Parnell (1991) found in their study that the

employers they surveyed tend to seek the best of both the academic and non-academic worlds in regard to employability skills. Their study revealed that employers seek candidates who have a sound academic base in regard to speaking, writing and calculation but also prefer that those candidates possess the ability to learn new technologies, can use computers as informational systems, are adept at interpersonal skills, and have the ability to do independent problem solving (p. 77).

Thus, as the review of the literature indicates, there is no true consensus among our very diverse employer base as to specifically which employability attributes are considered essential in an entry-level candidate. Fortunately, a commission established by the Federal Government undertook a similar study in the early 1990's that this project can use as an informational base. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) was "asked to define the know-how needed in the workplace" (SCANS, 1992; p. ix) and to "determine the skills that our young people need to succeed in the world of work" (p. xiii). Following a 1991 SCANS initial report entitled *What Work Requires of Schools*, the 1992 report established a list of foundation skills and workplace competencies using input from a broad-based consortium of employers. These skills and competencies, referred to as "workplace know-how", define the five competencies in the "workplace competencies" category as 1) resources, 2) interpersonal skills, 3) information, 4) systems, and 5) technology and the three skills defined in the "foundation skills" category as 1) basic skills, 2) thinking skills, and 3) personal qualities (p. xiv). For the purpose of specificity related to

the survey that this paper is to construct, each of the five competencies and three skills are defined as follows:

Workplace Competencies:

1) Resources: Knowing how to allocate time, money, materials and space.

2) Interpersonal Skills: Knowing how to work on teams, teach others, serve customers and work well with others of culturally diverse backgrounds.

3) Information: Knowing how to acquire data, maintain files, communicate, and use computers to process information.

4) Systems: Knowing social, organizational and technological systems and monitor and correct their own performance.

5) Technology: Knowing how to select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, and troubleshoot equipment.

Foundation Skills:

1) Basic Skills: Knowing how to read, write, speak, listen, and use arithmetic and mathematics.

2) Thinking Skills: Knowing how to learn, to reason, to be creative, to make decisions, and to solve problems.

3) Personal Qualities: Possessing individual responsibility, self-esteem and self-management; having integrity and honesty; and being sociable (p.xiv).

Throughout this report, each of the competencies and skills is defined in greater specificity. For example, under the 'mathematics' category, SCANS states that an entry-level employee should graduate from high school capable of understanding "mathematics well enough to make simple computations, estimate

results, interpret and develop diagrams and charts, work with computer programs, and apply mathematics in real-world situations (such as estimating unit costs or volume discounts" (p. 67).

Using the specifics provided by this watershed research project as well as the input gathered from the other research projects studied earlier in this literature review, a survey can now be constructed that can be considered both valid and contemporary. The methodology of that survey follows.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter will describe the subjects chosen for this study and relate how the subjects were selected. It will also provide details on the instrument used to collect the data for the study, the time expectancy required for completion of the survey, the procedures used to collect the data, and the data analysis.

As indicated earlier, the purpose of this study was to determine which personal and academic prerequisites prospective employers in the Chippewa Valley consider essential in an entry-level job applicant. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1) To determine the five most important entry-level skills/personality traits that employers in the Chippewa Valley seek in an entry-level job applicant.

2) To determine the rank order of importance of these five most important entry-level skills/personality traits.

3) To determine which entry-level skills/personality traits employers of the Chippewa Valley believe our local graduates possess/do not possess.

<u>Description of the Subjects</u>

The subjects used for this study are 60 (sixty) human resource people employed in various service and industry sectors in the Chippewa Valley area. The list of these participants as contact persons was obtained through the CESA 10 District Office located in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. CESA 10 serves as a liaison between the various school districts located in and around the Chippewa

Valley and maintains contact with the political and commercial entities within the CESA 10 area. The list of contact persons provided by CESA 10 and used in this survey represented an excellent and comprehensive compilation of the major employers of the Chippewa Valley.

<u>Instrumentation</u>

The instrument used in this study was designed by the researcher to elicit specific information from area employers concerning the basic skill levels of entry-level job applicants considered most important by these employers. The survey that each subject completed consists of a one-page questionnaire that lists ten basic job skills, which was established from information obtained during the literature review. From this list of ten basic job skills, the human resource contact person selected the five most important basic job skills by ranking them from "1" through "5", with "1" being the job skill considered most essential by that employer, "2" being the next most essential job skill, etc. Further, the survey asked each contact person whether or not he/she felt that recent entry-level employees possess these essential job skills by circling a "yes" or "no" in a column located next to the skill that they ranked. The survey was designed to take no more than 5-10 minutes to complete.

The skills that were included in the survey were selected from a variety of sources that were referred to earlier in this study. Most notably, the research of Presson & Johnson (1992), Schug & Western (1999), Hull & Parnell (1991), Schwartz (1998) and Hill & Petty (1995) provided a base of academic skills and personal attributes that enabled this study to establish a list of ten skills/attributes

that reflected their findings. Also instrumental in the development of the ten skills/attributes used in this study were two prominent governmental studies; the SCANS Report for America 2000 (1992) and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (1994). In comparing the foci and the findings of these researchers and reports, this study was able to identify six prominent academic skills and four prominent personal attributes that employers seek in an entry-level applicant. These six academic skills and four personal attributes constitute the survey used in this study. (See Appendix A).

Procedure

The instrument was mailed to each contact person with a self-addressed stamped envelope in the Spring of 2001. Information was provided that indicated the purpose of the study and instructions for the completion of the survey. (See Appendix B). The contact people were asked to return the completed survey within ten days. For those surveys that were not returned within the specified time period, a follow-up letter was sent with a self-addressed stamped envelope enclosed that again requested their participation.

Data Analysis

There are three specific objectives pertinent to this study. The first objective is to determine the five most important entry-level job skills/personality traits that service and production employers in the Chippewa Valley consider essential in an entry-level job applicant. When this data was received from the contact persons, the data was tallied and analyzed by recording the frequency and percentage that a particular job skill/personality trait was rated. The second

objective was recorded by counting the frequency that employers ranked specific

skills that depicted the employers' opinion pertinent to the importance of each

specific skill. The third objective used this aforementioned data to determine

which specific entry-level skills/traits employers of the Chippewa Valley believed

our local graduates do or do not possess. This final objective was determined by

recording the frequency and percentage of the "yes" and "no" responses they

were asked to provide.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis of Findings

<u>Introduction</u>

The primary purpose of this study was to determine, in rank order of importance, the five entry-level employability skills/personality traits employers in the Chippewa Valley seek in an entry-level job applicant. A secondary purpose of this study was to determine whether or not these employers believe that the entry-level candidates they are hiring adequately possess these aforementioned skills/traits.

<u>Findings of the Primary Research Question</u>

As mentioned above, the primary purpose of this study was to determine, in rank order of importance, the five entry-level employability skills/personality traits employers in the Chippewa Valley seek in an entry-level job applicant. The questionnaire (Appendix A) provided these employers with a list of six academic skills and four personality traits, categorized collectively as "basic workplace competencies", from which each employer was to select the five competencies he/she considered the "most essential." Sixty questionnaires were sent to Chippewa Valley employers of which thirty-eight were returned and tabulated.

The results of the survey were measured by assigning a score of "5" to the skill/trait considered most essential, a "4" to the skill/trait considered the second most essential, a "3" to the skill/trait considered the third most essential, a "2" to the skill/trait considered the fourth most essential and a "1" to the skill/trait considered the fifth most essential. The skills/traits not selected as one of the top

five skills/traits considered essential by the employer were assigned a "0". Thus, the rating scale ranged from a '0' as the lowest score a skill/trait could receive to a '5' being the highest score that a skill/trait could receive. As an example, had all respondents unanimously selected one specific skill/trait as the skill/trait they considered most essential, then that skill/trait would have received an average score of '5'. Conversely, had all respondents unanimously not selected one specific skill/trait, that skill/trait would have received an average score of '0'.

After compiling the average score for each of the skills/traits (see Appendix C) listed on the survey, the following results were established. Employers in the Chippewa Valley indicated that the trait categorized as 'Responsibility Traits' was clearly the most essential skill/trait desired in an entry-level job applicant. This trait received a 3.68 average score on a scale of 0 to 5. The second most essential skill/trait was that categorized as 'Listening Skills' with an average score of 2.42. The third most essential skill/trait was that categorized as 'Integrity Traits' with an average score of 2.16. The fourth most essential skill/trait was that categorized as 'Speaking Skills' with an average score of 2.05 and the fifth most essential skill/trait was that categorized as 'Teamwork Skills' with an average score of 1.71. On the opposite end of the scale, the skill/trait categorized as 'Personal Health Traits' ranked in last place with an average score of 0.13 followed, in ascending order from ninth to sixth rankings, by the skill/trait categorized as 'Technology Skills' (0.24), 'Mathematics Skills' (0.47), 'Computer Skills' (0.61) and 'Reading/Writing Skills' (1.47).

<u>Findings of the Secondary Research Question</u>

    The secondary purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the respondents to the survey believed that the entry-level job applicants they are hiring possess the skills/traits that they selected as the most essential. A limitation to the results of this study (see Appendix D) is that employers who indicated whether or not entry-level job applicants possess a skill/trait only responded in regard to the skills/traits that they had selected as the five most essential. Thus, those skills/traits that were <u>not</u> selected as frequently as others do not provide a true assessment of all thirty-eight respondents and the percentages in Appendix D cannot be implied to assume that they do.

    However, in regard to the five skills/traits that received the highest average scores on Appendix C, Appendix D indicates that 57% of the respondents who selected 'Responsibility Traits' (the most essential skill/trait as indicated in Appendix C) as an essential employability attribute believe that entry-level applicants possess this trait. 52% of the respondents who selected 'Listening Skills' (the second most essential skill/trait as indicated in Appendix C) as an essential employability attribute believe entry-level applicants possess this skill and 72% of the respondents who selected 'Integrity Traits' (third highest – Appendix C) as an essential trait believe the same. In regard to 'Speaking Skills' (fourth highest – Appendix C) and 'Teamwork Skills' (fifth highest – Appendix C), respondents believe that entry-level applicants possess these skills 52% and 68%, respectively.

The respondents considered the last five skills/traits listed in Appendix C as the least essential of the employability attributes. Therefore, most respondents did not select these skills/traits as one of the five most essential and, accordingly, did not indicate whether or not they believe entry-level applicants possess these attributes. Thus, the percentages related to these least essential attributes as indicated in Appendix D lose validity as the rankings descend.

Evaluation and Summary of Findings for the Primary Research Question

The results of this study indicated that employers in the Chippewa Valley consider several non-academic traits as the most essential employability attributes for entry-level applicants. Clearly, the 'Responsibility Traits' category was rated the highest by the respondents and indicates that these employers seek hard-working entry-level candidates who are dependable in regard to attendance and punctuality. Further, the study indicated that two other non-academic categories also ranked in the top five (Appendix C). 'Integrity Traits', which focuses on an employee's honesty and trustworthiness, was ranked third and 'Teamwork Skills', which focuses on an employee's sociability and willingness to work cooperatively with others, was ranked fifth. Finally, the other two categories that ranked in the top five – 'Listening Skills', which ranked second and 'Speaking Skills', which ranked fourth – could be classified as more related to the personality traits than to the academic skills. Thus, of the top five entry-level employability attributes considered essential by the respondents to this survey, personality traits ranked notably higher than did academic skills.

These findings are similar to those of several researchers cited in the literature review (Chapter Two) of this study. Asher (1988) found that many employers place more emphasis on non-academic skills such as enthusiasm, discipline, dependability and co-operativeness than upon academic proficiency and Hill & Petty (1995) determined that the employers they surveyed considered an employee's interpersonal skills, personal initiative and dependability as paramount in regard to workplace readiness. Carson, Huelskamp & Woodall (1993), in reviewing studies connected to Michigan and New York, found that employers seek four basic attributes in entry-level applicants: punctuality, respect for others, the ability to follow directions and honesty.

Though it is evident that the results of this study parallel others, it is important to note that this study dealt solely with the potential employers of entry-level candidates. It is probable that if this study were directed at another target audience that the results would differ significantly. If an identical survey were sent to the admissions officers at the university/technical college level, it is possible that they would seek attributes more closely related to the academic realm than to the non-academic. Further, if this survey were sent to human resource personnel at the professional level, their rankings could differ significantly as well. Thus, it is important for those in the educational community to understand that academic proficiency is an essential employability attribute when we look at the workplace as a whole. Theil (1985), Hull & Parnell (1991), Bottom, Presson & Johnson (1992) and the SCANS Report (1992) reinforce the need for a balanced educational program that emphasizes both the academic

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and personality aspects of a well-rounded individual. In other words, despite the findings of this study, it is essential to maintain a realistic perspective of the value and essentiality of an academic education.

Nonetheless, the intent of this study was designed solely to focus upon the employability attributes deemed essential by employers of entry-level job applicants in the Chippewa Valley. In regard to that target, this study indicated that these employers consistently place personality traits ahead of academic proficiency when categorizing the essential employability attributes of entry-level candidates.

<u>Evaluation and Summary of Findings for the Secondary Research Question</u>

The secondary research question asked the respondents to indicate whether or not they believed that entry-level applicants possessed the skill that they had selected as essential. As indicated in the literature review, many employers feel that today's potential employees lack the basic employability skills needed to be competent entry-level workers. Roger G. Ackerman's quote, which prefaced this study (NSSB, 2000, p. 3), believed that "barely half of all new employees entering the workforce possess these critical skills." According to the results of this study, Ackerman's statement is both validated and repudiated depending upon which "critical skill" is considered. For example, in regard to the 'Listening Skills' and 'Speaking Skills' categories, ranked second and fourth respectively in Appendix C, barely half of the respondents believe that entry-level employees possess these skills. The same could be said for 'Responsibility Traits', ranked first in the survey, in that only 57% of the respondents believe their entry-level

candidates possess these traits. However, in regard to 'Integrity Traits' and

'Teamwork Skills', respectively ranked third and fifth on Appendix C, the

respondents believe that 72% of their entry-level applicants possess the qualities

listed in the integrity category and 68% possess the attributes listed in the

teamwork category (see Appendix D). In the categories more closely related to

basic academics, the perceptions vary from a high ranking by the respondents in

the computer and technology categories to a considerably lower ranking in the

mathematics categories. However, as indicated earlier, the validity of the

categories that ranked in the lower tier of skills/attributes is questionable in that

most respondents did not select these skills/attributes as essential and,

therefore, did not address the secondary research question. Thus, it cannot be

implied that all thirty-eight respondents would have assessed these

skills/attributes identically to the percentages indicated in Appendix D.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The focus of this study was to determine which job skills and/or personality traits were considered the most essential by employers of entry-level job applicants in the Chippewa Valley. A review of related literature indicated that there is no specific consensus among employers in regard to which skills/traits are considered the most essential. However, using the findings that were established by prior research efforts as well as governmental initiates such as the SCANS and SWOA reports, a list of ten skills/traits were established for use in this study. This list of ten skills/traits included six academic categories related to the disciplines of communication, mathematics, computer and technology and four personality traits related to teamwork, responsibility, integrity and personal health. This list was sent to sixty employers in the Chippewa Valley who hire entry-level employees. Each employer selected and ranked the five most essential skills/traits that they believed an entry-level employee should possess. Each employer also indicated whether or not they believed the entry-level applicants they are currently hiring possess the skill/trait they selected as essential.

The results of the study indicated that a majority of the respondents categorized 'Responsibility Traits' as the most essential entry-level attribute. Further, the traits categorized as 'Integrity Traits' and 'Teamwork Skills' placed third and fifth, respectively. Thus, of the five most essential entry-level

skills/traits selected by the respondents, three were non-academic. Of the skills categorized as academic, only the skills categorized as 'Listening Skills' and 'Speaking Skills' were ranked in the top five.

Thus, this study reinforced broader research efforts that maintained that affective personality traits may be considered more important than academic proficiencies in regard to the skills/traits considered most essential by employers of entry-level job applicants. Though limited to employers of the Chippewa Valley, this study reaffirmed other studies that emphasized the importance of positive personality traits as an essential component of entry-level job readiness.

Conclusions

The study indicated that potential employers of entry-level job applicants in the Chippewa Valley seek applicants that possess work-ready personality traits and the ability to listen and communicate effectively. This is not to infer, however, that academic proficiencies are not of merit. Certainly, employers of professional-level applicants and university admissions officers may consider academic proficiency above personality traits when selecting candidates at these higher levels. However, this study focused specifically upon the entry-level job applicant in that it is this student population that leaves our schools upon graduation and enters directly into the area workforce. These students, unfortunately, do not have the opportunity to hone their employability skills/traits while in the world of continued education. Thus, it is this student population that most directly is in need of an effective elementary and secondary curriculum that establishes job-readiness academic skills and personality traits.

In regard to the effectiveness of this aforementioned curriculum, it appears that most of the respondents feel that anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of our high school graduates possess the skills/traits they deemed most essential. However, this can also be regarded conversely in that most of respondents feel that anywhere from one-half to one-third of our high school graduates do <u>not</u> possess the skills/traits deemed most essential. Thus, it is imperative that the schools in the Chippewa Valley consider these statistics in order to address the deficiencies indicated in this study.

<u>Recommendations</u>

As indicated in the findings, the respondents to this survey indicated that anywhere from one-half to one-third of our graduates do not possess the essential skills/traits deemed necessary for workplace readiness. As a result of these findings, perhaps it is necessary for our schools to review their curricula to determine where/how we are failing our graduates in this regard. By emphasizing, across the curriculum, the skills/traits deemed essential for workplace readiness by entry-level employers, we can develop and/or enhance these attributes before our graduates enter the workforce. It appears that all our area employers ask is that our graduates possess the basic ability to communicate effectively, to listen, to be dependable and responsible, to demonstrate honesty and integrity, and to be able to work effectively in cooperation with others. Though these skills/traits may be woven into the curriculum, perhaps they are not specifically addressed to a sufficient degree.

Thus, they may not be subject to frequent monitoring and evaluation and the development of these basic skills may be impaired.

It appears that our schools need to do more to make certain that both students and staff are cognizant of the essentiality of these basic skills in regard to workplace readiness. Staff inservices may be used for this purpose and, perhaps, a return to the 'old days' where emphasis on reliability, cooperation and integrity were an integral part of a student's overall intellectual development. Further, administrative policies on appropriate behavior and attendance could be more strictly enforced as a means to demonstrate the necessity of these attributes in regard to future employability.

Accordingly, future research may be of value in regard to the aforementioned recommendations. To what extent are our area school's emphasizing personality traits in their curricula? What administrative initiatives are being implemented to establish these important traits? What programs are in practice or in development in our nation to address these issues?

It is the primary objective of our elementary and secondary schools to prepare our students with the tools that they will need to build a successful life. With this objective in mind, it is essential that the educational world investigate whether or not these objectives are being met especially for the graduate that moves directly from the world of academia into the world of work.

APPENDIX A

Dear Human Resource Contact Person:

Listed below are **ten (10)** basic workplace competencies compiled from a selection of various research projects. From this list, please select which **five (5)** skills/traits you feel are **the most essential** for an entry-level worker (a worker who goes directly from high school to the workplace) to possess. After selecting these five skills/traits, please prioritize these five by placing the number "**1**" by the skill/trait which you feel is the **most** essential, a "**2**" by the skill/trait which you feel is the **next most** essential, etc. **Also**, in the column located next to the five skills/traits that you selected, please circle the "**yes**" if you believe that most entry-level workers that you are hiring **possess that skill/trait** or the "**no**" if you believe that most entry-level workers that you are hiring **do not possess that skill/trait**.

RANKING   **SKILL/COMPETENCY**

_____   A) Speaking Skills: The worker can express himself/herself using the spoken word and can communicate effectively with fellow workers, supervisors and/or clients/customers.

_____   B) Listening Skills: The worker can receive, interpret and respond correctly and appropriately to oral instructions and communications.

_____   C) Reading/Writing Skills: The worker can interpret written materials and can effectively express himself/herself in written form.

_____   D) Mathematics Skills: The worker can perform basic arithmetic functions such as division and multiplication and can accurately interpret graphs, diagrams and measurement instruments.

_____   E) Computer Skills: The worker understands the basics of how computers work and how to use them for obtaining information.)

_____   F) Technology Skills: The worker understands the proper procedures for selecting, setting up, operating and maintaining machines commonly used in the workplace.

_____   G) Teamwork Skills: The worker is a sociable, friendly and polite person who is able to work cooperatively with others.

_____   H) Responsibility Traits: The worker consistently works hard, can be relied upon to complete a task, and is dependable in regard to attendance and punctuality.

_____   I) Integrity Traits: The worker is honest and trustworthy and consistently follows the rules established in the workplace and in society.

_____   J) Personal Health Traits: The worker demonstrates a concern for their personal well-being and maintains acceptable standards in regard to hygiene, physical appearance and dress.

APPENDIX B

<div align="center">Monday, April 2nd, 2001</div>

From: Sheila Thompson
715 Veronica Street
Chippewa Falls, WI 54729-3439
(715) 726-1187

To: Director of Human Resources
Various Employers of the Chippewa Valley

Dear Human Resources Manager:

Hello. My name is Sheila Thompson and I am an Eighth Grade Learning Disabilities teacher in Chippewa Falls who is pursuing a Master's Degree from the University of Wisconsin – Stout. I am contacting you in hopes that you will assist me, with a few moments of your time, on a thesis project that I am currently developing.

My thesis topic investigates the importance of entry-level job skills/traits. By contacting a number of Chippewa Valley employers, I hope to be able to determine <u>which</u> entry-level job skills/traits are considered the <u>most important</u> by the employers of the Valley when it comes to hiring entry-level applicants.

I believe that this is an important study that will provide valuable information that can be used by both the educational and business communities in our Valley. In comparing the data collected in this survey to the academic standards established by our state and to the curricular standards established in our schools, we may be able to determine whether or not we are adequately meeting the employment needs of our students. With your input, we can determine which course of action we need to take in order to make our students more employable which will directly benefit both the potential employee and the potential employer.

I am enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope in which you may return the survey. It is designed so that it should not take you more than a few minutes to complete as I realize your time is valuable. The instructions precede the actual survey and, I hope, are clearly worded. If you don't mind, I will do a "follow-up" contact in two weeks in the event the survey did not get to you or if the returned survey did not get back to me.
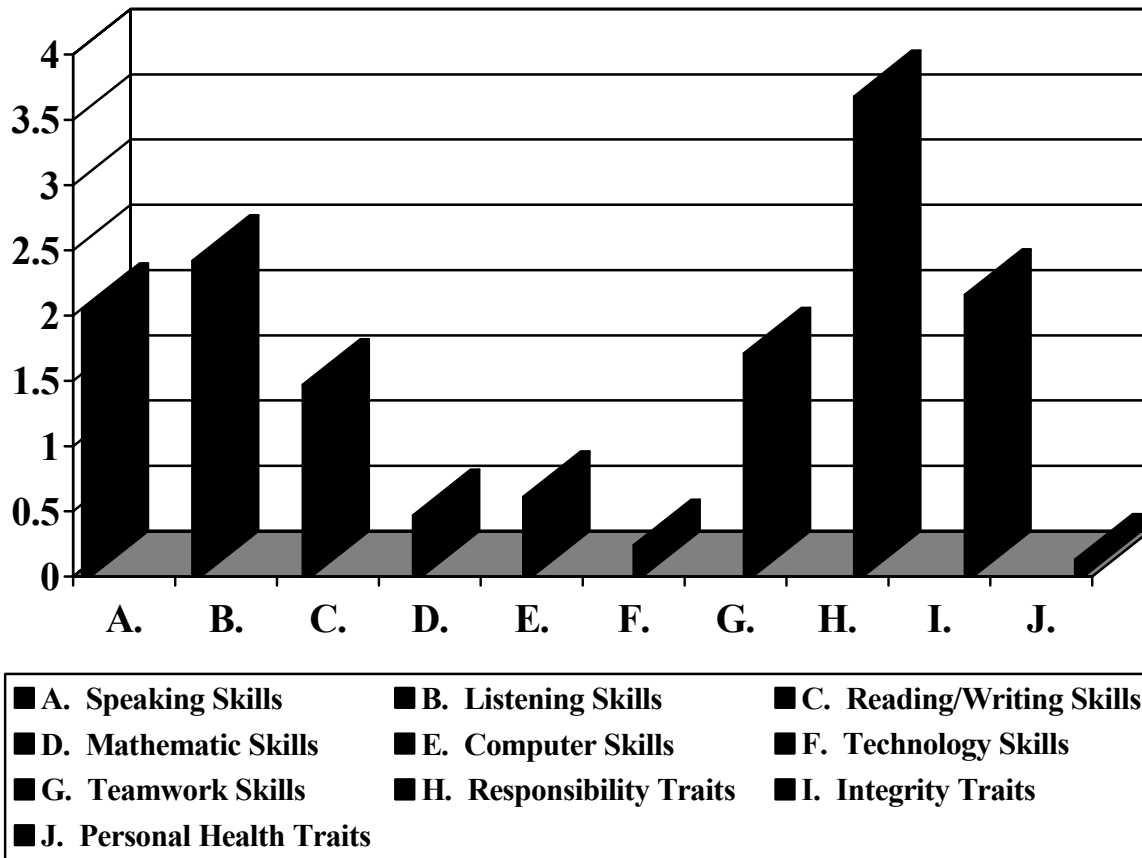
Of course, <u>your participation in this survey is voluntary</u> and I assure you that your <u>individual responses will be kept strictly confidential</u>. For those of you who decide to participate in this venture, I thank you in advance for your help.
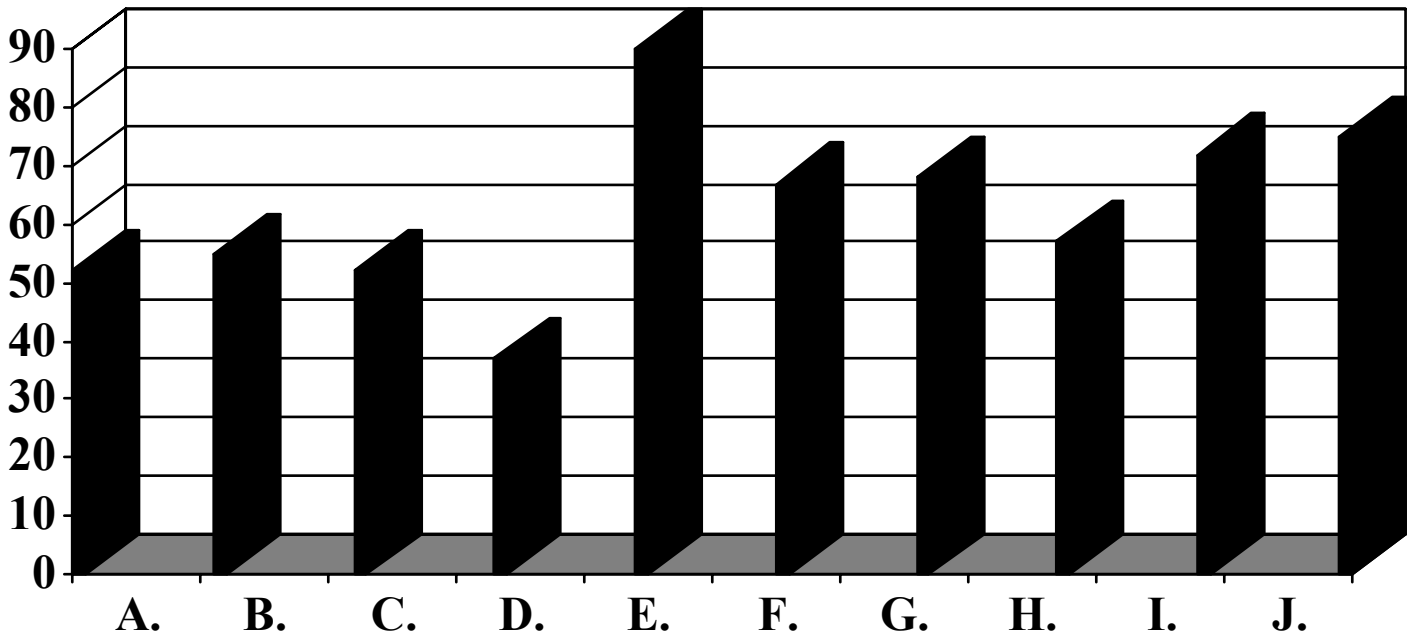
Sincerely,

Sheila R. Thompson

APPENDIX C

Basic Skills/Traits Employers Ranked Most Important

Legend:
- A. Speaking Skills
- B. Listening Skills
- C. Reading/Writing Skills
- D. Mathematic Skills
- E. Computer Skills
- F. Technology Skills
- G. Teamwork Skills
- H. Responsibility Traits
- I. Integrity Traits
- J. Personal Health Traits

Percentages of Students Possessing Basic Skills

Legend:
- A. Speaking Skills
- B. Listening Skills
- C. Reading/Writing Skills
- D. Mathematic Skills
- E. Computer Skills
- F. Technology Skills
- G. Teamwork Skills
- H. Responsibility Skills
- I. Integrity Skills
- J. Personal Health Traits

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